Only Human

By: TimberWolfie

What if Neytiri had been the marine, and Jake the Na'vi prince? Neytiri is now 'Nicole', who comes as a replacement Avatar driver after her twin sister's death. Through her learning with Grace, she meets 'Ja'kanhe', who becomes her mentor. Will Nicole and Grace be able to succeed and save the Omaticaya clan together? Or were the events that happened simply unstoppable?

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Chapter One

Author's note: A story with 'universe alterations' – that being, Neytiri is now Nicole, a young marine who has come to Pandora to take over her late twin sister's Avatar. Whilst learning through Grace Augustine and the native N'deh, she is requested by Quaritch to get to know the natives. Through this she meets the young Omaticayan prince, Ja'kanhe, who trains her, much to the distress of his future mate, Tsu'tei.

In a male dominated human world, will Nicole and Grace be able to save the Omaticaya clan before it's too late? Will they avoid death and heartache? Or were the events that happened simply unstoppable?

A story I wanted to do several weeks ago, and requested by ObeliskX.

PLEASE NOTE: This story follows a lot of the original storyline of *Avatar* – that is, *Project 880,* the unproduced script . Several storylines, ideas and moments will be coming from the original scriptment by James Cameron.

Neytiri/Jake, Grace/N'deh, Norm/Trudy

Rated M for profanity, sexual references, drug references and violent themes

Dedicated to ObeliskX and laurenkeyblade. Thank you for bringing me back to Pandora.

Chapter One

She felt like she was in a coffin. And perhaps she might as well have been.

Nicole's eyes flashed open, finding herself floating in a strange liquid. It was as if she were a fish in a tank with how small the space was. If the fish had its body caught in seaweed or something. She found herself strapped down to the bed. Thank God she wasn't claustrophobic, or prone to freak outs. Her skin looked like it had been drained of all its blood on the journey over, and as she became more aware of her surroundings, a dull pounding in the back of her head made itself known. That's what happens when drugs are pumped into a human system, the effect to cause one to hibernate like bears and other mammals, dozing away the years with minimal cerebral activity.

But she was never into the science crap. That had been her sister's job. So how the hell had she gotten here?

There was a tapping sound behind her, and she bent her head backwards to see a very haggard looking attendant staring at her through the glass. He nodded, and made a motion of pressing buttons on the other side, and she felt herself begin to shift. The liquid began to drain around her, leaving her perfectly dry. Before she could even question how that worked, she found the ceiling above her moving away, and she found herself looking at the attendant outside. He smiled down at her as he floated in zero gravity, though she was still strapped down.

She groaned, and looked up at the man. He wore the scrubs of doctors, and as she looked around at the hundreds of other coffin-like devices being pulled out, she noticed he was one doctor of four, commanding over four hundred sleepers. Goddamn. "Hats off to you, man," she told him with a dark laugh.

He shrugged, giving her a flawless, obviously surgically enhanced smile. "You all right, sweetheart?"

Her jaw clenched at the label. She rolled her eyes. "I was," she said. The doctor, seeing he'd touched a nerve, raised his eyebrows and then helped to unbuckle her.

As she was able to sit up, she felt like she had lost all her muscle mass on the flight over. And she felt like she had had five shots of tequila and an ass kicking. But all her soreness and grogginess seemed to dissipate as she looked directly ahead of her, and saw the sight of a lifetime.

Pandora. She felt like she was looking into the past. It was so much like Earth, a hundred years ago. Before all the global warming, before the nuclear effects, before it was overpopulated, before flora and fauna extinctions left right and centre… She could hardly believe her eyes. It looked so small in her vision, floating right near the large Polyphemus. So close yet so far. Senselessly, she reached her hand out, her index and her thumb fingers zeroing in on Pandora. She gave a small smile; it was so tiny from here, though she knew that was a matter of perspective. The fact was that that, right in front of her, was going to be her home for the next five years. The beautiful, untouched Eden that was the alien planet. The one she had heard about on the news, seen documentaries, everything. She had to admit, it was a sight to behold. She could see the body of the planet, lush and green, and the blue blood that ran through its veins. Was this how those astronauts felt, all those years ago?

It wasn't meant to be her, but right now, looking at it, she felt like it was. This was where she was meant to be right now. Here she wasn't just a piece of discarded human trash.

"A vision, isn't it?" the doctor asked. He still hadn't left, and Nicole immediately felt herself getting defensive. She had been having a private moment. She just rolled her eyes, and moved away from the bed she had been slumbering in for five and a half years. And yet she still felt sleepy.

Stretching out her nimble body, she floated over to some lockers, glad she only had to use her arms to move easily right now. The metal locker read *Moakley, S.* They never changed it. Opening it, she found the large bag she had packed, all those years before. Though to her it had just been shutting her eyes.

"Moakley! Has anyone seen Corporal Moakley?"

The sharp bark came from a man that terribly mismatched the voice. He was shorter than her, she noticed, with pale skin that made her think of a corpse. Though his deadened looks told nothing of his personality. He was like a little stick of dynamite as he pushed his way through the other floating crew members. She called back with a 'Yessir!' and he came towards her, glancing at her before sharply nodding his head. "Because of your… condition," he said hesitatingly, "We want you to board the shuttle first. Just makes it easier. Time wise."

"Yessir," was all she said, but her thoughts were, *You don't have to make me sound like a deadly disease, asshole.* She tacked the last bit on because she could tell that for all his bite and acting, that's what it was – acting. He wasn't one of her leaders. From the looks of it, he was one of the scientists, which made her even more pissed off. He couldn't even say the word of her disability. Political correctness gone too far, to the point that was more insulting than actually saying it.

But maybe she was just pissy. That's all she was, these days. Though she tried to focus on the fact that Pandora might be a little better than what she was used to.

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"You're not in Kansas, anymore. You are on Pandora, ladies and gentleman. Respect that fact, every second of every day. If there is a Hell, you might wanna go there for some R&R after a tour on Pandora. Out there beyond that fence, every living thing that crawls, flies or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubes."

Contrary to what that doctor had said, Nicole going first onto the shuttle had not helped with time. Every one of her comrades had run out the door onto the tarmac before she could even get ready. With a grunt, she had pushed the wheelchair out into its shape, shaking her

head at the fact it was so old. She had thought, with everything they had on this planet, they could have made it a bit easier for her to navigate. So after struggling with a wheelchair that seemed over a 150 years old, she had gone through, ignoring the jibes from the other military personnel. She'd gotten it all before.

"Meals on wheels!" one had said as she passed, before a large AMP suit had stalked right past her, the wearer yelling "Hey watch it, hot rod!" She smirked a little when he got taken aback and muttered, thinking she hadn't heard, "Very hot." Damn straight. So he slightly redeemed himself through that.

But all the hassle of the wheelchair had made her late for briefing. Perhaps it had been her own fault, but she hated being babied. It made her feel useless – who wouldn't? She didn't need to be reminded of her physical failings. She could pass any test anyone could pass.

The first test however had been arriving on time. As she wheeled herself into the hall, she saw the older commander giving a speech. Well it seemed like she hadn't missed much then. He was a strong, beefy man, with silver cropped hair. Just an ordinary military commander, like she had always dealt with. She knew their humourless, take-no-shit personas. But this one was different by an aesthetic element – the right side of his face, through his hair and near his eye, was twisted by three claw-like scars. She didn't flinch, just frowned at it. What could have possibly done that?

His uniform read his name – M. Quaritch. And as she was looking at it, he turned around to look right at her. His blue eyes raked over her, and it seemed like he gave a scoff. She looked at him, her expression enigmatic. Eventually, he gave her a nod of acknowledgment, before looking back to the rest of the crew stationed. "We have an indigenous population of humanoids called the Na'vi. They're fond of arrows dipped in a neurotoxin that will stop your heart in one minute."

Arrows. Nicole had seen those as she came in. They were huge. They looked almost as tall as her. Huge, stake-like weapons had been plunged into a tire of one of the large mining vehicles that had passed her as she came in. She'd been shot before. She knew what a bullet felt like. A horrible experience. A red, hot searing pain was the most cliché way to describe it, though it was true. But she figured that was shit all compared to one of those going through you, and logic told her that it had happened before, considering Colonel Quaritch's choice of words. Nasty.

"As head of security, it is my job to keep you alive. I will not succeed. Not with all of you." How pleasant. Nicole felt the air change around her, from anticipation to nervousness. All of them were eyeing that disfiguring scar. "If you wish to survive, you need to cultivate a strong, mental aptitude. You got to obey the rules: Pandora rules. Rule number one..." Quaritch continued, before drawling off on multiple rules – don't go out after dark. Stay in groups. Never forget your fellow man. Nicole gave a quirk of a smile. *Nothing like an old-school safety brief to put your mind at ease,* she couldn't help but think.

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The group dispersed shortly after Quaritch finished his speech. Doctors and Avatar drivers were to report to the labs. Military personnel to the barracks immediately. Everyone was given a directions. *Great. Now where do I go?* she thought to herself.

The colonel seemed unconcerned with whatever she did. She began to head towards the labs with the doctors and Avatar drivers, everyone swarming in different directions, lugging trunks and duffel bags. She just lost herself within the crowd, until she heard a, "Nicole? Nicole!"

So she looked around behind her, knowing with all the people milling around it would be downright stupid to move her entire body around. She found herself looking into the eyes of a tall, spindly man with a

mop of brown hair. He breathed out as he saw her, a grin appearing across his face. "Wow… You look just like her!"

It was what she and her sister had gotten throughout their entire lives – 'You look just like your sister! The two of you are just identical!' No shit – they were *identical twins.* But she had her sister, older by two minutes, had grinned and bared it, often laughing along with the person who said it. They'd had fun messing with people as to who was who when they were younger. Until Nicole had been confined to a wheelchair, and that just gave the game away. Today, when this strange man said that to her, she didn't say anything. It was still too raw. In reality, she had learnt about her sister's death three weeks ago.

Remembering himself, he stuck out his hand. "I'm so sorry, I'm Norm. Norm Spellman. I went through Avatar training with her."

"Ah," she said with a brusque nod. "Nice to meet you."

He gave her a sympathetic glance. Sympathy for losing her sister or her legs, she couldn't tell. But he remembered himself again it seemed, for he said, "Um, anyway. Would you – would you like to come and see the Avatars? That is where you're headed, right?"

"Yes," was all she said, and she suddenly got the shocking impression he was going to push her there, as he went behind her, but he only did it to let some people through. Good. He might have gotten a torrent of arguments at him, and she didn't think it would be wise to unleash that on someone she'd just met. Especially since he came off as so fragile to her. Like a twig, in body and mind.

They walked down the busy hall, Norm seeming to know the ins and outs of a place he'd never been in his life. She followed him quickly, until they came to a set of glass doors that opened with a card swipe. "They haven't put our fingerprints in yet," he said, "So I got a key from Doctor Shipley before coming in."

The glass doors obeyed and opened, and the two went in. It was a mass amalgamation of the latest technology, with tablets, important-looking science instruments, and things she couldn't put names to. Scientists in white lab coats moved around rapidly, and Norm was able to stop one to ask for assistance. She pointed towards the end of the room, saying, "The other drivers will come in soon. And they can – oh, hold on. Max! *Max* !"

At her voice, a bespectacled middle-aged man with wiry black hair and a beard looked over. He was standing near a computer, and upon spying Nicole and Norm, smiled and came over. "Thanks Carrie," he said to the scientist, who smiled and left the group. Max shook hands with the two of them. "So you guys are Norm and Sylvia?"

There was a beat of hesitation, and she figured it was up to her to fix it. "Nicole."

"But there's a Sylvia on…" In the corner of her eye, she saw Norm give a quick shake of his head. Understanding seemed to light in Max's eyes, and he pushed his glasses up his nose further. "Sorry, Nicole." He gave her an apologetic smile. "Anyway, I'm assuming you're here to see your Avatars?"

"You'd be right!" Norm said with a huge, childlike grin. She gave a snort of laughter at it. Clearly this was his toy store. But then she saw what he was wanting to see, and she didn't feel like laughing at him any longer.

There were several cylindrical tanks. Amnio tanks. They held a blue liquid, and inside, suspended, were the Avatars. *Huge.* Nicole slowly rolled over, ignoring whatever Norm and Max were saying as she went to look at it.

It looked like a large baby in a womb. And she realised, with a little uneasiness mingled with excitement, and wonder, that it was like seeing her sister in the womb. Was this what their mother had seen, all those years before? Well obviously not exactly but… was the

feeling of amazement the same? The large cyan creature floated, long black hair floating as gracefully as seaweed in the liquid. The long plait that ran from the base of the skull to the waist looked like a rope, as did the long, panther-like tail. Embarrassingly, they were naked, so she could see the breasts of the creature if it moved too much, kicking in the fluid.

But she didn't care the minute she looked at the face. The soft, heart-shaped features, elegant nose, the large eyes… "Looks like her," Nicole murmured, a smile coming to her.

"No," came a response. She hadn't realised Norm had followed her. "Looks like you. This is your Avatar, Nicole."

She tried to ignore the awkwardness she felt at the fact that though the Avatar right now had its hand near its chest, its tail between its legs like a scared dog, it was naked, and Norm was effectively looking at that. But he seemed to show no reservations as he eagerly showed her his Avatar. *Looks better than you right now* , she thought to herself as she eyed the large biceps the creature had. She kept her eyes locked on its face and chest.

"So the proprioceptive sims worked pretty well!" Norm said, sounding amazed. She frowned at the strange words she didn't know.

"Yeah, they've got great muscle tone. Give us a few hours, you guys can take them for a spin. Maybe you should get some sleep before then," Max replied.

Nicole groaned. "I've slept for five and a half years – I don't need any more."

He laughed. "Well, it's nearly eight o'clock, so the other Avatar drivers will be unlinking soon. This will be a good chance for you to meet Doctor Augustine."

Norm's mouth dropped open. "You – we're – what?" he asked, absolutely flabbergasted. She arched an eyebrow. "We're going to

meet her, today?" Max nodded. "Oh my God!" Upon seeing that Nicole was not sharing his enthusiasm, he explained eagerly, "Grace Augustine is a legend. I mean, she practically wrote the book – I mean *wrote. The. Book.* – on Pandoran botany."

"She will be your boss for the next five years, so don't piss her off, okay? Just remember she likes plants better than people." Max said, tapping him with a clipboard. He looked contemplatively down at Nicole, and bent down to her level. Ouch. "I know this might seem kind of like a scary place, but trust me, if you can get through Grace, you can live on Pandora easily."

"Honestly I think at this point, if I go through without kicking you in the balls, I'll consider my time a success," she said, wheeling past Max to inspect the tablets before he could piece together exactly what she had said.

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The link deactivated, and its user groggily sat up. "God…" she murmured, rubbing her face with her hands. Fifteen years she'd been doing this, and one would think she was used to it by now. But what she wasn't used to was the hostility that she had fought so long to keep from happening, was happening.

Grace Augustine was fifty-four years old, but these days she felt closer to seventy. At least in her Avatar it was a different story. She looked down at her body. The white, uneven skin tone, her pudgy body shape. She felt her straw-like red hair, and groaned. She hated this body. The only aspect of the other side she had was of the three strands of wooden beads around her neck. Her only connection when she was in this one. She'd never say it out loud, but fuck, what she wouldn't trade to just stay in the other forever.

But she couldn't, and the effects of being under for sixteen hours straight, with no food, water or other substances had taken its toll. "Who's got my goddamn cigarette?" she barked, causing three young scientists to jump into action. That's how it was around the lab

– Doctor Augustine commanded, and the others obeyed. One young man ran up to her with a pre-lit cigarette, which she thanked him for, putting it between her lips as a young woman gave her a white lab coat.

"Ah there she is! Cinderella back from the ball." Grace rolled her eyes at the statement as Max came in, followed by two unknowns. She stood up from the link chamber, brushing herself down and hoping she didn't smell too badly. She looked at the strangers, seeing a bookish looking man and… a woman in a wheelchair. Christ. What kind of half-assed program was RDA running? But still… a woman. For once. Sexist pricks finally listened to her.

"Grace," Max smiled cheerily, his hands in his pockets as he tilted his head to the man. "I'd like you to meet Norm Spellman and Nicole Moakley."

Her eyes fell on Nicole momentarily, taking her in. She was dark skinned, like Max, but seemed of a different ethnic background. She had a pretty, elongated face that ended in a soft round chin, framed by a soft black bob. Her delicate looks ended right there naturally, though. Her body looked more lean and muscular, making Grace suddenly feel self-conscious, and her expression looked like it was conveying a 'Piss off' attitude. *Military grunt* , she thought. *Fuck. What's worse? Another man, or a woman in the military joining us?* Neither sounding pleasing.

So she turned her attention to the man she could pigeon-hole. Norm looked easier to understand at face value. "Norm," she said, making him beam when she gave him attention. "I've heard good things about you. How's your Na'vi?"

Yep, I was right , she thought as he suddenly sprung into action. " *May the All Mother smile upon our first meeting* ," he said, touching his hand to his forehead and then rolling his arm out to her. It was stilted talking, but pronunciation was top notch.

She gave him a nod of approval, and took a drag on her cigarette. *"Not bad. You sound a little formal.* "

" *I studied for many years but, there is still much to learn. I can try –* "

"Grace?" Max interrupted quickly, making Norm scowl as the spotlight was taken off. She figured she had a bit of a fan. How cute. She looked at the man she had worked with for so many years, and blinked once at him. He eventually understood the meaning, for he pointed behind him to the other newcomer. "This is Nicole Moakley."

She turned to the woman, who greeted with a courteous, "Ma'am", and tried to shake her hand. She wasn't having any of it. "Yeah, yeah. I know who you are, and I don't need you. I need your sister. The scientist? I didn't realise I was trading a scientist for a trigger happy moron."

"Sorry. I wasn't the one who pulled the trigger on her," Nicole said matter-of-factly.

Grace breathed out slowly, eyeing her. She frowned. "How much training have you had? In science, or Pandora itself, or…?"

There was a beat, before, "I dissected a frog once in high school. Saw documentaries on Pandora."

Wow. Grace put her hand to her head, and took another drag on her cigarette. *Fuck my life.* " *I swear this is punishment* ," she muttered in Na'vi, which Norm seemed to understand. She had to remember he knew a lot. She couldn't just swear people off in the lab and they look at her blankly anymore. There were people who spoke it, sure, but no one was as fluent as her, and she often said it way too fast for them to pick up every word she was saying.

She looked at Nicole directly. "The three of you, get to dinner. And tomorrow, be here at 0800. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," came the response, a little too sharply for Grace's tastes. But they were out of her hair, for now.

She stretched, wanting to get some sleep. It would be a long day tomorrow. She looked at her link chamber, thinking to what happened that day. Hopefully it would be better in the morning. Touching the wooden beads around her neck, she knew that worrying would not change anything. All she could do was wait for a better day.

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Nicole slept fitfully that night. She could only picture the flames, her sister in the cardboard box… They just didn't even care enough to put her in a proper coffin. Well actually, her family couldn't afford it. They hadn't even been able to afford to fix her legs. And she certainly couldn't do it herself. It had been Sylvia. Sylvia who had sworn that come fifteen years, if Nicole could just wait… She'd have the money for it. The painfully ironic part was now that *she* had a chance to get the money in her stead, and while it could repair her legs, it would never repair the pain that she knew she hadn't been able to give Sylvia a proper funeral.

She looked over from her bed in the dormitory to see the time – 0600. Two hours before she had to be in the lab. Around her, five other military women slept. The rooms were still allocated on gender lines – just too big a risk to take, she guessed. Quietly, she slipped out from her bed, which was just a piece of stretched canvas above the ground with a duvet, and hopped quickly into the shower.

Admittedly, she took a little longer in that. A shower… She hadn't had a proper one in ages. Water shortages on Earth limited people, and scientists had come up with small plastic packets with a white liquid for waterless 'showers'. Effective, admittedly, but nothing beat the feeling of the hot water cascading down her back, running along her oily skin. Probably she shouldn't have been doing this alone, and it was hard with no use of her legs, but her arms were strong. She pulled herself in and turned the tap on. She ran her fingers through

her wet hair, a smile on her face. She sat under the spray for a little while, scrubbing herself at times, just relaxing in others. By the time she got out, dragged herself back into her chair, she had killed half an hour. Half an hour of sitting in water… She told herself that had been very wrong to do, but God, that had felt good. She had never felt so clean.

She quickly got changed and, seeing as she had nothing else to do, she headed down to the lab. She was shocked to see the Avatars had been taken out of the tubes – they were drained and cleaned. They must have taken them out whilst they were at dinner. So she wheeled herself around, just looking. At the back of the room, there were huge tanks, like the Avatar 'wombs'. They all had murky water in them, though. Curious as was her nature, she wheeled herself over, and looked in.

Quick as a flash, a large, fish-like creature hit against the glass, making Nicole jump slightly. She didn't jump easily, but that was one fucking weird looking thing. It was larger than her, with huge razor-sharp teeth clacking against the glass.

"So I see you met our pet." She turned to see Grace coming in behind her. "Just a baby, right now. But she's growing so fast we will have to put her in the lake soon."

Seriously? That's a baby? Shit. Nicole was dumbstruck as the scientist came over, looking at the creature directly in the eye. It must have gotten scared, for it suddenly melted into the gloom.

So now they were alone. The scientist turned around to look at her, sizing her up again. She was still scowling, but it didn't seem to be as dark as yesterday. Maybe the sleep had done her some good for her mood. "You're early," she said.

Nicole nodded. "Better to be early than late, right?"

"Mmmm." Grace reached into her lab coat, taking out a cigarette from a pack, and lit it.

She couldn't help but frown herself. "I find it interesting that you are a botanist, a scientist – and you smoke. We are in the 22nd century, you know. Got a wealth of reasons why we shouldn't."

"And I've got a wealth of reasons as to why you shouldn't be here. Listen to me, girl," Grace said, making Nicole look directly at her. She bent down. "Woman to woman, we need to talk. RDA is severely understaffed. Based on what I read about you before you came here, you don't even have enough skills to work in the kitchen. I needed a real scientist, which is what your sister was." She groaned, creaking her neck. "The situation is bad here. Parker just wants to fuck us around and strip mine the damn planet. He doesn't want to listen to me that the real treasure is out there, in the forest. Now your home planet was killed because its biodiversity was destroyed. Out here, there are wonders we can't even imagine… And goddammit I did not ask for a witless marine to come out here and help aid the destruction. So I beg you, do not get under my feet – "

The 'feet' comment must have triggered something. Nicole interrupted quickly, looking Grace directly in the eye with a look of defiance. She straightened up in her chair. "Hey, lady?" she objected, her eyes holding fires within them. "I did not come light years out into space, didn't get shot up with drugs and inoculated against fuck-knows-what, and frozen for five years, to come here and be your personal punching bag. Sounds like you got some personal issues with whoever Parker is, but guess what – I'm not him. So if you've got some problem with me, tell the base supervisor, or else, take a pill."

There was a long silence. Grace's eyes almost narrowed to slits as she looked at her, before she gave a derisive snort. She pulled back, nodding slowly. "A live one, then?"

"Yeah. Alive and kicking. So we can spend the next five years tearing at one another, or we can try and work together. Your call."

She looked at the young woman for a long moment. Grace then gave a curt nod, and waved her off. "You'll be testing out your Avatar

today. Better hop to it."

And Nicole didn't know it, but as she left, Grace was smiling. Nicole had fight in her, and it left the scientist thinking that maybe she wasn't so bad after all.

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At 0800 the lab was bustling with activity. Scientists barking at one another as they all prepared for the first link session of the new Avatar drivers. Grace was like a commander, getting everyone into position. She took Norm and Nicole over to their links, and he wasted no time in getting under. Nicole however, pushed at the gel bottom, looked at the wires, her face in awe. Grace didn't hold it against her, and just patiently waited. She offered to help with the chair, but the marine turned around with a, "No! I can do that."

The scientist put her hands up, moving away to start the program up. "Keep your head down, and let your mind go blank, all right? Make sure you close your eyes," Grace said, before she felt like she was in a coffin again as the lid went down.

She swallowed, and breathed out, doing so.

And all of a sudden, two scientists with masks on were looking down at her. Their talking was muffled, but the man and the woman were smiling at her, until she heard a, "Can you hear us, Nicole?"

A smile crossed her lips, and she nodded. "Hey, guys," she said.

"See if you can sit up slowly, hon," the man said, and reluctantly, she did. The woman smiled at her, encouraging her to touch her fingers together. But all their words left when she stretched slightly, and felt her legs.

Her legs… they moved. They *moved.*

She looked down in awe, and tested it. Her eyes widened as she wiggled her toes, which the woman congratulated her on like a baby walking for the first time. But she just didn't understand… she couldn't believe it. Slowly, she swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"Whoa, slow down, whirlwind!" the man laughed, coming to take Nicole's hand. She took hers back with a slight frown, before focusing back on her feet. She put them on the floor. They were responding… Whatever she wanted, they did it. Perfectly. Like they were completely a part of her, as they hadn't been for many years.

So she stood up. The wires that were on her were inconsequential, though the machine that was attached didn't think so as it set off a drone of warning. "Nicole, you have to sit!" yelled a scientist.

"No, no, I can do this!" she said, steadying herself, her arms out on either side as she gained her balance. Wow, humans were tiny. She could hardly believe it as she looked at herself. She began to move, and forgot she had a tail. She looked around as it swiped a monitor on wheels effortlessly to the side.

There came a yelling from behind the glass. "Nicole! Nicole, you must sit! You're not used to your body, yet!"

Oh, but she was. She had a wide grin on her face, ignoring the others as they begged her to sit. "This is great!" she breathed.

And before anyone could react, she left.

"Nicole!" came Norm's voice, but she was out the door.

The Pandoran air hit her, the clearest, most crisp air she had ever breathed in. It had the faintest smell of cinnamon. She saw some other Avatar drivers playing basketball, their long, elegant legs making it easy to jump and score. She laughed as she ran past them, but they looked bewildered as she ran out in a hospital garment.

"Nicole! *Nicole!* Dammit, get back here!" Norm yelled, breathless. And she had barely started running.

Running. Oh she had forgotten how good that felt. Her powerful legs churned up the dirt and grass under them, and she surged forward, her heart pounding in protest. Her breath came out raggedly as she pushed on, the biggest, most childish grin on her face.

She was in complete control of her entire body. She could feel the absolute power, the strength of her body. She hadn't felt this fantastic in years.

She skidded to a stop, sending a wave of dirt forward. She breathed out, looking up to the magnificently blue sky. She'd never seen a blue sky before… She closed her eyes, just taking it all in. Taking in this miracle of a place…

"Hey soldier!"

Nicole looked over to a smiling Avatar. Her body was something that models would have killed for, with a large bust, thin waist, and elegant long legs. Her face looked so familiar, and that voice… She wore cargo shorts and a Stanford top, with a beaded pendant. She smiled as the name came to her. "Grace…?"

"Of course! Looks like link up worked well." She struck a pose, pushing her hip out and putting a hand on her waist, making Nicole laugh. "Ain't I a babe?"

"Looks good," she said shakily, before bending over, getting her breath back. Tears came to her eyes as she looked at her body. It was her body. She had been running… Sure it wasn't her body, exactly, but… it felt like it. She had commanded it to run.

She felt a finger brush against her cheek, and realised that a tear had escaped her eye. She looked up at Grace, and the two smiled at one another. "Yep. Looks like everything's perfect, kiddo," she said, showing Nicole her wet index finger.

She gave a trembling laugh. "That's the first time I've run in…" She didn't want to think about it.

There was a moment of silence, before Grace put her hand comfortingly on her shoulder. Nicole didn't shrug it off like she usually would have. She needed it right now, even from her. She just needed some reassurance right now. "I know," was all the scientist said.

"Hey guys!" The two women looked over to see Norm finally making up the lost space, and breathing heavily. "Jesus… Don't run so fast!"

"Don't chase me then," she said simply.

Grace chuckled, before realising that effectively, Nicole was naked underneath the robe, and there was no proper backing to it. She quickly turned her around properly so he couldn't see. Human men were all the same in her eyes. "Let's get you both into some clothing, hmm? I think I have some old shorts that will fit you. Or we can find something better."

• • •

"How'd it go?" Max asked as he opened the upper clamshell of the link chamber. A wide smile on her face answered Max's question. Nicole slowly sat up and stretched, before looking to another chamber that opened by the driver. Norm sat up as well, and then Grace on the other side of him.

She sighed as she looked down at herself. "Damn. Same ol' sack of bones." She swung her legs over the side, and clapped her hands to the other scientists. "Let's get some lunch and then we can head out again. These newbies aren't used to such long hours without food yet."

"Then we better set a gourmet feast!" Max chortled, offering to help Nicole with her wheelchair, but she brushed him off.

"Gourmet, my fanny," Grace grumbled, "It's probably just inedible swill."

"Charming," Nicole chortled, wheeling herself after the three intellectuals. Max hurried off to grab them something to munch on while Grace led them over to a group of the scientists. Immediately, she got entangled in the chatter, so much so that she didn't notice another figure approaching the table.

Nicole did. A young woman, about her age, in a flight suit. She took off her sunglasses and shook out her dark ponytail. "Nicole Moakley?" she asked, and the one in question put up her hand. "Colonel Quaritch wants to see you."

She frowned, exchanging a puzzled glance with Norm. He shrugged. She excused herself from the group and followed the woman, and Grace scowled after her.

The woman introduced herself as Trudy Chachon, one of the pilots. The two suddenly got engrossed in talking, having relatable jobs. "You guys are packing some heavy artillery," Nicole said as she looked around at all the weaponry.

"Well, we're not the only ones out there, or the biggest," Trudy said matter-of-factly, before smiling at Nicole. "I'm glad you're here, Nicky."

"Nicole," she smiled at Trudy, effectively politely telling her she didn't like nicknames. Trudy nodded understandingly. "Well, I'm going to need a door gun from time to time. I'm a person short so…"

"No problem." Trudy beamed.

They continued to walk amongst the troops and the heavy duty weaponry, before Trudy pointed down towards a makeshift gym in what was obviously a previous weapons locker. Inside Nicole saw the colonel bench-pressing huge plates. Impressive.

Saying a thank you to her guide, she wheeled herself over to the man, sitting by the door. "You called for me, sir?" she asked.

He didn't say anything at first – he just continued to work, before moving the huge plates up to store back. "This low gravity will make you soft," he said, sitting up slowly. "You get soft, and Pandora will shit you out dead with zero warning."

He was sweating but not winded, and from his looks with the scar and the look in his eyes he gave her, he embodied a complete 'Do not fuck with me' attitude.

"I pulled your record, you've done some tough stuff. Venezuela, that was some mean bush. You got heart girl, I'll give you that. What exactly made you come here?"

"Figured it was just another hellhole," she said with a shrug.

Quaritch laughed. "Well, it's worse," he said, standing up. "Especially for a woman in the Avatar program."

She didn't think that comment had been necessary.

"Why would you say that, sir?" she asked.

"You see, Moakley, Augustine and I never saw eye to eye. And trust me, she knows how to get her claws in you." He gave a smirk and gestured to his scar, pretending to rake his fingers through it to get the point across. "She says all the right things to make people try and bend to these blue monkey's will. She will do the same to you. And she will think it'll be easier getting through to you because you share the same body parts."

There was a lot of this conversation Nicole didn't like, but she didn't say so. *Do I say something, or do I keep my job?* was what was going through her head, and she wondered if it showed on her face. She had to choose the 'smarter' option – she bit her tongue and waited for him to finish.

"But I suppose I'm going to offer something better before she does. But before that, I must ask you – what has she offered for your help?"

"Nothing," she said honestly, "Except that if I stay out of her way, I might learn something."

"Inadvertently, she's offered you more – with your Avatar you can run, right?" She slowly nodded. "Well how would you like to run in your real body? In three months?"

She frowned, confused. "My apologies, sir, but I don't – "

"Five years you have here, right? In this 'hellhole'. With Augustine and her crew. But what if I were to shorten that to three months if you do a little something for me?"

She was intrigued, and he saw that; he gave a smirk. "That scientist Norm Spellman is here to get into the native's hub, and talk to them. But I can't do shit with a scientist. A marine, now, I could use. You can get into their camp, and get me the intel I need. This is how it will work – you will be under Augustine's command, on paper. But you report to me. You will be telling me exactly how to get what we need through the Na'vi. You would be doing something real, keeping some of my boys from going home like you. Or bagged-and-tagged. And I promise to get your legs back to you completely in three months if you succeed. I do take care of my own. How's that sound?"

It sounded like her entire future was being given to her on a plate, and she was in awe that she didn't know what to say. But that line, 'I do take care of my own' sounded hollow. She remembered the speech that morning – 'I will not succeed. Not with all of you.'

But this was the best thing she'd had since she ran that morning. She wanted that. For real. Not some blue pile of flesh she commanded through a psychic link or whatever. Her own legs… In three months. That hope won over her woes. Her own mobility, not having to pull herself from a bed or a couch to her wheelchair, being

able to run as much as she could… Already she was envisioning back home, her legs pounding on the concrete pavement as she ran around the neighbourhood block, running perhaps to the bar or to the small park they had in the city centre. Better yet, she'd be there in three months. Compared to five years, that was a godsend.

A smile came over her face and she gave a nod. "Okay, sir."

Quaritch nodded at her, before standing up and telling to run her tail back to Augustine, giving a laugh as if he'd made a wonderful joke.

• • •

Nicole found herself sitting in the Avatar compound longhouse, in her second body after lunch. She was wearing a simple maroon top, just like Grace's, which was tight-fitting over her chest. The pants she wore were fitted properly, and Grace said they actually worked better than shorts when they went out to the forest.

"When will we be doing that?" Nicole asked

"Tomorrow." She paused suddenly, as if she had to carefully edit the phrase in her mind before she said it. "I want you to meet someone then."

Nicole tilted her head, not understanding the meaning behind it. "Who? Another Avatar driver?"

Grace hesitated again. Her elongated fingers played absently with the wooden necklace. "More like someone who provided your Avatar."

She frowned, thoroughly confused by the scientist. Who was she talking about? Another scientist?

But when Grace just looked at her, still playing with the necklace, the penny dropped. That had been her hint. She was not a fainter, but she had a feeling she could keel over just then. "You're taking me to

meet the aliens," she murmured, her voice going up an octave higher than usual.

" *Na'vi,* " Grace sharply corrected, and Nicole wondered if the spell that she seemed to have when in her Avatar body was broken, but she turned softer again. "You'll meet one of them. He's one of the only ones from the Omaticaya clan who will work with us any longer."

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm. I keep forgetting how little you know." She opened her mouth to retort before Grace cut in, "I didn't mean it as an insult. Actually, I shouldn't have said it at all – I bet you anything Norm doesn't know, either. How could you? It happened while you were sleeping away."

"What, exactly?"

Grace turned around, busying herself with closing the chest of clothing they kept in the long house, before continuing. She cleared her throat. "There was an incident three years ago. You know why RDA is here, right?"

Of course. Everyone knew that. Unobtanium. Everyone on Earth knew of its value and what it could do. She gave Grace a look to say 'Go on', but when she didn't, she had to verbally clarify that yes, for twenty-eight years she had not been living under a rock. No pun intended.

"Well, the biggest deposits happen to be sacred sites to the Omaticaya clan – the main clan around here. And unfortunately, RDA are wanting to clear the sites to get at it. There was an incident where some Na'vi got hurt, and the clan want nothing to do with us. Only about five out of about five hundred will do anything with us."

So basically, they had a drawing of straws to see who will deal with the humans, and this native drew short, Nicole thought.

"The patriarch of the Omaticaya clan really doesn't want anything to do with us, ever. But to keep the peace, he had no choice but to let us talk to some members."

"So who is it?"

Grace moved to sit down on the chest, her tail crossing over her legs. It would take Nicole some time to get used to the extra appendage. "His name is N'deh. He speaks English, which should make it easier for you. But I want you to come with me, and see how the world around here is. Because, girl, it's hard out here."

The conversation with Quaritch rang eerily through her mind. 'See how the world is,' Grace said. 'She knows how to get her claws in you,' he had said.

Nicole scoffed, and smiled. "I've been to hard places."

Grace returned the smile. But it wasn't happy. It wasn't friendly. It was just a sad smile, and the way she looked at Nicole it was almost as if she wanted her to understand something. "I know. But… this is something different. Because the hardest part isn't an enemy, or anything like that – it's the fact that you will grow to love it too much."

Chapter Two

Chapter Two

No one had properly prepared Nicole for the night. She always knew that the flora of Pandora was beautifully diverse – the images she'd seen back home were of a vast array of luminous ferns, trees, moss… But no image or video could truly capture the magnificence of it.

It was all she could do but sit on the inside of the fence, on a large wooden vault that made up some of the training equipment for the Avatars, and watch. Before her eyes, the blue sky turned to an incredible shade of violet. The huge gas giant Polyphemus stood out in a soft hue of blue, a wonderful eye catcher in the sky. And as she cast her eyes over past the fence, she could see the forest change as the sun set. The ferns came to life, glowing in colours of purple, green, blue, pink… Above the treeline she could see flying creatures – stingbats, banshees – silhouetted against the darkening sky. She could hear the squall of birds and some apex predator giving a roar in the distance. That, however, was overshadowed by the roar of the tractors that came through the gate. The machines were returning. The huge things trundled in, followed by powersuits that stride among them, dwarfing the troopers in their masks. Everyone was tired; it had been a long day, and tomorrow would be even more so.

Nicole stretched her new body, looking down at her legs again with a smile. She splashed them in a little puddle of water that had collected at the base of the vault. She kicked some droplets onto the sand, before letting it settle, seeing her new face in it. Through the puddle, she could see several shipping containers behind her – large rectangular pieces of metal that looked so out of place with the woodland behind them. But as she looked at it, she noticed a strange silhouette. She blinked, trying to see if her eyes were playing tricks on her; but no, it stayed there.

She turned around, and her breath caught in her throat. There, crouched upon the container, was a man. With a tail.

Nicole swallowed as she looked at it, wondering if she should alert some of the troopers – a Na'vi had entered the compound! But then she thought back to what Grace had said. She slowly stood up, trying to remember the name. "N'deh?" she tried.

The figure moved. It had been so still, so statuesque upon the container, but it moved like it was gliding through water. Golden eyes alighted upon her, and the Na'vi stood up to its full height, before jumping soundlessly to the floor. She assumed she had been right in the name.

He came over to her, and she took in what he was wearing – a loincloth of animal skin, with a leather tube slung across his back. As he came closer, she realised he was carrying a large spear, but he kept it down near the ground so it wasn't a threat. She still felt alienated by him, especially as he came closer and sniffed her, his nose crinkling like he didn't approve.

"I see you've met the man of the hour," Grace said as she strode towards the duo. N'deh's head snapped up at her voice, his ears flickering. *That's weird,* Nicole thought, though she knew her ears moved too when she heard something in this body.

N'deh made a motion of touching his fingers to his forehead, and then extending them to Grace. She smiled warmly and did the same, before coming to Nicole's side. As she took in this native, and Grace, and how she herself looked, she could see some differences. N'deh's nose was flatter, more similar to her own, while Grace's Avatar had taken more human features. She wondered if that was because hers was made eight or so years ago – maybe the first Avatars hadn't been as close to replicating them?

"Nicole, I'd like you to meet N'deh Hermequeftewa. N'deh, this is my latest project, Nicole Moakley."

He blinked slowly once at her, which she had no idea how to take. As she looked at him, he estimated he was in his mid-thirties. Grace herself looked like she had taken thirty years off – in her twenties. And Nicole had realised when she had properly looked at herself that she didn't look a day over seventeen.

N'deh suddenly spoke rapidly to Grace. The words that came out of his mouth were lilting and musical, and Nicole had to admit some amazement now at it, especially when her mentor responded just as rapidly and supposedly just as well. Norm didn't hold a candle to Grace, who had been properly speaking it with the Na'vi for so many years.

Nicole's eyes went back to the fence as they spoke – Grace was laughing, which surprised her – but it all stopped abruptly as several shots rang through the air. There was commotion near the gate. She looked over to see several troopers and AMP suits trying to shoot into the treeline, but they obviously missed, for she soon saw what they were shooting at.

An enormous creature, the size of an elephant, crashed through the fence. It had a huge horn that ran across its face like a plank, and gave out a trumpeting call. "Hammerhead titanothere!" Grace yelled, pushing at Nicole to move. "Get on the shipping container, quickly!"

She wasted no time in doing as commanded, especially when she heard a sickening crunch – glancing quickly back, she saw the hammerhead had knocked one of the AMP suits to the floor, and plunged its feet into the glass, killing whoever was inside by smashing their skull into their brain tissue. "Holy shit!" Nicole yelled.

She felt the wind knocked out of her as she was sent toppling to the floor. Grace had jumped from the container to push her out of the way, which had succeeded, but now she was in the line of fire. She scrambled to her feet, trying to run as her death came closer.

Thwack!

The creature suddenly roared, running blindly as a huge arrow hit right into its eye. It veered off its course to the women and back towards the fence. It crashed through the chain metal, running into the forest. The troops cheered as if they had been the ones to scare it off, yelling, "Yeah, that's what we're talking about bitch!" but Nicole knew the truth.

N'deh fell back down to the floor, moving like a liquid. He stowed his bow and arrow, before coming to them. He extended a hand out to Grace to help her up, before offering the same to Nicole, who refused and stood up of her own accord. But she did have to say something to them. Both of them.

"You guys just saved my ass… Thank you."

The Na'vi looked at her, blinking slowly once. Grace nodded shakily, trying to get her breath back. N'deh retrieved an arrow from his tube, showing her. The arrowhead was tiny, and based on what she saw of that creature, it looked like the eye had been the best shot for all the armour it had. "Luck," N'deh said simply, because that's really what it was. If he had just been a fraction off the target… "Fishing arrows not good for attacking them."

She breathed out slowly, and Grace put a hand on her shoulder. "You okay?" She nodded in response, before she heard wailing. The trio turned to see large, wasp-like creatures, easily half a metre long, dashing from the forest. They were trying to fasten their legs into the troopers, making them jump around and try to kill the creatures. Three troopers went down.

Grace, you've been smoking something, surely. How could I ever come to love this place? Nicole thought, traumatised, as the woman in question pushed her to the safety of the compound.

• • •

" *It seems like you have an… interesting student.* "

Over the roar of the helicopters, Grace could just hear N'deh talking to her. She followed his gaze to where Nicole was in the helicopter, by the door-gun, looking out as they flew over the lake. Beside her was the small human form of Lyle Wainfleet. A condition by RDA that scientists always had to be accompanied by military personnel, and for some reason Nicole didn't seem to cut it in Quaritch's eyes.

Quaritch. She'd met some pricks in her time but he was the fucking cactus. Every single word out of his mouth, every single action he did, seemed to be an intentional effort to screw her over. He and Parker together… Shit, they were a formidable team. It wasn't the case of one was the brawn and the other the brains – no, Parker was the brains, yes, but Quaritch was an extremely sharp knife in the drawer. She could bitch about him for weeks on end, but it wouldn't get her anywhere – actual action needed to be taken against him, but how? No one would dare stand up to the human leaders.

And perhaps that was why the Na'vi seemed so much better. There were formalities and titles, yes, but no one ruled with an iron fist. It would explain why N'deh was still able to help – because Mo'at and Eytukan knew that an entire ban of relations between the two species was improbable, not to mention, impossible. It would just cause even more troubles. She was glad they didn't see in black and white.

She turned her topaz eyes to N'deh, and blinked once. " *She's definitely different to anyone I've dealt with as an Avatar,* " she said, *"but I think she has promise* ." *Else I wouldn't have stuck my neck out for her* , she added in her head.

" *What makes you say that? Because she's a woman?"*

If a human man had said that to her, she would have said a snappy retort and probably given them the middle finger. But she knew what N'deh meant. Grace had ranted to him for years about how the ratio of male to female Avatar drivers was 5 to 1. She had had seven girls in all her years of being on Pandora under her command. Five had come and gone. Two remained. Now three. So N'deh didn't say it

unkindly – it was simply a statement. And as if to drive the point home, he continued, " *She'll learn very quickly if she's anything like you.* "

Grace sent N'deh a wicked grin. *"I had the best teacher.* "

His ears moved as he caught her compliment, and though he didn't smile, she noticed his tail flicking in contentment. " *Only because I had the easiest student. Though one I wished would stop questioning me every single day on exactly how each plant came to be. I hope Nicole isn't as curious as you are.* "

A melodic laugh erupted from her, causing Nicole to look over. Grace shook her head in reassurance, before calling to the pilot in the cockpit, "Hey, touch down at the field, would you?"

"You got it!" came the response.

Grace peered over to the door, looking over human Wainfleet and Avatar Nicole. She saw the large lake, where a large herd of animals were. She pointed them out. "A sturmbeest herd!" she called to Nicole, who gave her a thumbs up to say she understood.

They landed in a clearing in the forest, causing several deer-like creatures to run into the safety of the trees. Up close, it was clear how huge the trees were – easily over a hundred metres tall. The lesser trees, the size of what fully grown oaks would have been back on Earth, were shrubbery in comparison. They were like huge sequoia trees, and Nicole's mouth was agape as she looked around. She'd never seen a true tree before.

"Keep your mouth open like that, darling," Wainfleet murmured.

There was a warning growl behind him; N'deh had heard that, and he didn't like it. Wainfleet seemed unconcerned at the native's 'threat', but Nicole knew the meaning. She gave the Na'vi a smile.

"Take your shoes off, Nicole," Grace instructed, climbing down from the helicopter to the long, free-growing grass. She walked over to her as she unhooked the gun from the door. "We need to toughen up your little baby footsies."

"Yes, boss," came the response, but not in a disrespectful way. She was taking off her shoes quickly, and Nicole placed them into the grass. She closed her eyes, a smile playing across her lips at the pureness of the feeling.

All of Wainfleet's teasing performance had gone as the stage fright of the forest came to him. He clicked his gun, looking wildly about the trees on hyper alert. As the two Avatars and the Na'vi began to head towards the treeline, he began to come after them, but Grace put her foot down. *I don't need some jarhead following us,* she thought angrily.

"Lyle, stay with the ship," she commanded, looking down at the puny human.

"But I'm supposed to escort you!" he retorted.

She exhaled slowly. She'd make this easy for him. "Your job is – unfortunately – to protect my party. That ship is part of my party. So unless you want to walk thirty klicks through the bush…"

"I'll stay with the ship."

Damn right you will.

Nicole still had her gun, but she seemed to have lowered her guard. Strange for a military person. Grace wondered if N'deh's saving shot the night before might have had something to do with it. She didn't ask, but was thankful – one idiot with a gun was enough.

But Nicole didn't seem to display any true idiotic qualities as they walked. That is until she opened her mouth and said

somewhat accusingly, "You're holding your gun really strangely."

Grace looked at the grip she had on the rifle, and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Yeah, I wasn't exactly in the military."

"No need to get defensive, just… here, adjust your finger grip." And before Grace could actually take in what was happening, Nicole had slipped her hand under her hand and moved her fingers this way and that, so much so that she wondered if they would break from the strange way they were being stretched now. "There, it will have better handling and you will be able to focus it quicker."

She made a face. She hated guns. Bad experiences from the past had left her as a gun pacifist. "I'd prefer a flame thrower than this thing," she muttered, holding up her hand to see the new finger poster she had been given.

"Yeah… let's just keep it to one weapon, 'kay? It will be easier for me to keep track of your errors."

N'deh's footfalls were silent in the underbrush; Grace was a little louder, but still quiet; Nicole walked like she had tap-dance shoes strapped to her feet as she clashed through the forest, and slapped at herself as insects came out to feast on her.

Thankfully, Grace spied a small, spindly tree with grey looking bark. It looked helpless next to the domineering ones that made up the bulk of the forest, but this one served a special purpose. She made a signal with her tail as she bent over it, and N'deh came to pass her a large machete. Expertly, she hacked at it, causing a green sap to ooze out. She plunged her hands in, and smeared the fluid over her, encouraging Nicole to do the same. Insects wouldn't bother them now.

They walked through the primeval gloom, with Nicole twisting her head so much to look at everything, it was a wonder she didn't trip

constantly, though they had a couple of near misses. *Just like how I was with my first time* , Grace thought cheerily.

The trio walked, with N'deh sometimes pointing out some animals here and there, or Grace doing so. But as they got further into the jungle, the smile on Nicole's face became apparent. She was intrigued by the alien world, and that had been exactly Grace's intention.

• • •

"Dude, it doesn't count if you don't hit its head."

"Shut up! I need to focus!"

Lyle trained his gun on the group of prolemuris who had just happened to choose the trees nearby to swing on. The pilot had his tablet out, ready to transfer the twenty dollars he'd owe Lyle if he hit one, right in its face.

But then he caught some larger movement in his eye. Just so happened that the field they were in was a prime spot for grazing a herd of direhorses. He ran his tongue over his lips and looked at the pilot, shaking his gun towards the small group of three. "Fifty bucks says I nail all three. What say you?"

"You're on, buddy."

Lyle smirked. "Prepare the transfer," he said, before aiming at the neck of the first.

POOM!

The first fell to the ground motionless, causing the other two to whinny in fright and begin to run to the treeline.

POOM! POOM!

The second collapsed in a pool of blood, seeping into the moss of the forest floor. Spooked out of its mind, the third ran towards the edge of the treeline, and its head had disappeared already between the trees.

"Doesn't count if you can't get all three!" the pilot called with a laugh.

POOM!

"You owe me big, son," Lyle grunted, wiping his nose. "Perfect shot!"

Not as perfect as the one that was thrown at him. A blue hand came to smack him across the face, the sheer force knocking him right off his feet and leaving him sprawling in the grass. Grace lunged herself to crouch over him, looking as formidable as a tiger. Lyle yelped as she snatched the rifle out of his hands, tossing it far behind her.

"Little boys shouldn't play with guns," she snarled, before her fingers sought the edge of his mask. "Perhaps I oughta snatch this off you, Wainfleet… Give you a little fresh air, how does that sound?"

"Please, doc, I beg ya!" Lyle whimpered, trying to fight to press the mask deeply onto his face.

Grace made a noise in the back of her throat of disgust. She stood up, seeing N'deh walking towards the felled creatures, and came to fall into step beside him.

Lyle slowly stood up, watching the retreating blue figure of the scientist. He spat into the grass, before reaching for his sidearm. Being confined to the lab would be like paralysis to her, everyone knew that. One shot, and she'd be blown away…

Nicole saw the motion, and she didn't think – she just acted. With the power of a freight train, she slammed into Lyle, knocking him backwards. No one got to blow Grace's Avatar away if she had anything to say about it. Once he was down, she grabbed his shirt, throwing him against the helicopter. She was amazed at how easy it

was to throw them around in this body, and the sickening snap of a bone pleased her. His arm was broken, but she wasn't done with him yet.

"Lyle! Look at me!" she said, grabbing him by the shoulders and pushing him into the metal of the helicopter. He screamed at the pain of the shattered bone – a greenstick break.

Nicole shoved her face in his, and said slowly, "You try to do shit like that again, and I'll bite your throat out." And with an animalistic instinct that surged through her second body, she snarled, baring her teeth at him. Lyle whimpered as she let him go, letting him fall limply to the floor.

N'deh and Grace exchanged glances. His face said everything she needed to know – 'You may just be right about this one.'

Seeing as Nicole was still in attack mode, Grace was hesitant to come too near to her for fear of startling her. "Thank you, Nicole," she murmured. "You… You just saved my life."

The young woman turned around, a smile coming across her pretty Avatar face. "What's the old saying? 'An eye for an eye'?"

Everything about that moment, from the words to the actions to her expression, and Grace had the answer to the question which had been plaguing her.

"Grace, what on earth?" the pilot yelled from the cockpit, starting it up. "He needs medical attention!"

"He does? Hmm, let me see for a second…" Grace reached into her pockets, seeming to dig ferociously in the shallow pouches, before pulling out the lining. "There. That's all the fucks I give."

Nicole had to bite her lip to keep from bursting into laughter. *You're pretty cool* , she thought, looking at her mentor who was looking at the pilot with a deathly glare.

"I'm gonna have to take him back!"

"Fine, take him back. You'd be doing the sighted world a favour." Throwing her hip out, she turned tail and looked to the treeline. Lyle, cradling his arm, clambered back into the helicopter to be transported back to the safety of Hell's Gate, but not before she turned around and added, "Also, we're on Pandora – the term 'what on earth' doesn't really apply here!"

She wasn't even heard, as the roar of the helicopter took over all the sound in the field. She shook her head in exasperation.

There was a soft neighing sound, and the trio turned to see a harrowing sight – a little foal, previously hidden by the foliage, had come to nose at its deceased herd. The sounds it made were pitiful as it cried for its family.

"Fuckhead," Grace snarled under her breath.

Nicole's ears went back involuntarily. *How dreadful* , she thought.

N'deh eyed the foal, giving a soft whistle. The creature turned its small head, its eyes focusing on the Na'vi. Slowly, he moved over to it, coming so close he could almost touch the velvet nose. But then in Nicole's eyes, he did something very peculiar – he gave a sharp call, a noise from the back of his throat, which sounded like a guttural bark.

"He'll be okay," Grace said, and initially Nicole didn't know if she meant the horse or N'deh, but the latter came towards them again, and she got the answer.

And they didn't know it, but once they had disappeared back into the forest, a blue hand came out to stroke the foal's face. Four fingers ran over its elegant neck, before it was picked up from the middle, and taken away.

• • •

" *Are you taking her where I think you're taking her?* " N'deh asked innocently; Grace winked at him.

"Huh?" Nicole asked, frowning at the conferring duo. Grace knew that she knew they were talking about her.

"Just follow us," was the only response she got, and Nicole kept quiet the rest of the way.

As they walked over roots, through soft moss and ferns, they eventually came to another clearing. But this one held a wooden shack. It looked like a smaller version of the Avatar compound, minus metal bars.

Grace bit her lip, wondering if this had been a mistake. Maybe this wasn't the right time to take her here. But she had to know. N'deh looked at her anxiously. "Come on," she said, not sure if she was telling them, or saying it to calm herself down.

As they came closer, it became more obvious how neglected the place was. Creeping vines had taken over, and stingbats had come to roost in the eves, hissing at the intruders. Lizard-like creatures crept along the floorboards, scattering away at the sound of their footsteps. The whole place had a patina of mistreatment, but of course it did – no one came here. No one wanted to go near it, this house of horrors. She felt a wobbly breath leave her.

" *Grace, you don't have to do this,* " he murmured quietly.

She looked to him, giving a shrug – it was a movement she used so often with him he knew exactly what it meant. *"I have no choice. I have to get through to her before someone else does.* "

Nicole was looking around, seeing the desks, the scattered books, the solar system model that hung above their heads. She bent down to see a copy of *The Lorax* – an old children's book. She picked it up, flicking through the paper pages. On the inside cover was a

printed sticker: *'To Ja'kanhe – I know how much you loved this book! Happy reading, my bright star. From Grace.* '

Grace swallowed, and came over to Nicole, crouching down beside her. She put her hand out, and the book was passed to her. "I suppose you have questions."

"You could say that," came the reply.

"Remember the incident I mentioned? And that's the reason only a handful of Na'vi will talk to us?" Nicole nodded. "Well… I was a teacher. For a time. To the Omaticaya clan. I was a student of theirs first, and then, I taught them. Especially the children." She could tell Nicole was listening by the way her ears subconsciously flicked. "But one day, five children didn't come to class. They had grown sick of the mining, of the human involvement, and they decided to take matters into their own hands. They fired arrows at the mining equipment and some troopers. Of course, we have better weapons.

"So they ran to me, thinking I could protect them, but, I failed. They were gunned down. Right here. There was a twenty year old, an eighteen year old, two sixteen year olds, a fourteen year old… And an eight year old."

There was absolute silence in the classroom. No one spoke. Nicole didn't know what to say. She didn't consider herself a touchy-feely type, but she knew the pain of seeing someone shot right in front of someone. It was one of the most distressing things in the world, even for those trained in the military. Silently, she reached a five-fingered blue hand out to Grace, and put it on hers.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. It was all she could offer.

Grace nodded, and put the children's book down. She tilted her head towards the door. "Let's get outta here. I want to show you one last thing today, and then we can go back."

The two stood, and N'deh watched Grace go, a worried expression on his face. Nicole let them walk ahead of her, letting the story sink in. They must have been his people. *How is he so calm around us?* she wondered, for when she glanced back at the classroom when she reached the door, she saw the evidence that gave validation to the story – the blackboard, with beautiful chalk writing, was riddled with bullet holes.

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Trudy was the one to pick them up, which all three of them were thankful for. She shut off the engine, and shook her head at Nicole. But it wasn't condemning – she was laughing as she did it. "Goddamn woman," she chortled, "word around camp is you're the lucky bitch who got to do what everyone wanted to."

"Give Lyle a run for his money? Damn straight," Grace said. Nicole smiled as she heard the twinge of pride in her voice. "Saved my behind too."

"So I heard! Let's hope you don't get in too much trouble for that."

"It was nothing, really," Nicole said as she, Grace and N'deh came to sit in the back of the helicopter. Honestly, her logic was twofold – from what she had gleamed of Parker, everything in the world he saw with his own eyes held a price tag, and an Avatar would be one of biggest ones. He would chuck a conniption if one was killed. And two, who the hell wanted to feel themselves die? If she could be feeling the blades of grass under her feet so clearly, she didn't think she wanted to feel herself gasping for air, feeling her life's blood seep out of her, only to wake up and realise she was fine. That sounded like a one way ticket to the psychiatrist's office and copious amounts of antidepressants.

But as they sat in the helicopter, they were met with an unwelcome surprise – another trooper. Grace scowled, and looked at Trudy, who gave her a look that read, 'Come on, you know the rules.' The

trooper, whose nametag read 'B. Onozuki'. He eyed Nicole off warily; she shot him a sharp-toothed grin.

"I mean it, girl," Grace said as they began to take off. "Thank you."

She shrugged, but she was happy to have been useful.

The helicopter flew out of the field, and as Nicole quickly looked back, she noticed the fallen direhorses were gone.

They took to the skies effortlessly, churning up some water spray as they flew over a lake, near a cascading waterfall. Every scenery was breathtaking to her. Coming from such a grey world, it was like she could finally see. She closed her eyes, breathing in the clear air.

"Hey, you're gonna wanna keep your eyes open for this," Grace called to her. So she opened them. And saw the most amazing sights she had ever seen.

Mountainous chunks of rock, some over twenty kilometres across, hung suspended in the air. Some held their own little ecosystems on the top, with cascading waterfalls. Others were more barren, and some actually had human encroachments – she could see two long metal shacks on two of the mountains as they flew over.

Once the shock had passed, the explanation came. This was the rarest phenomena in all the known universe. Grace began to explain about magnetic fields and the impact it had on unobtanium, which were what they were made out of, but Nicole was lost in the explanation and just agreed that it was an incredible sight to behold.

"A nice way to end the day," Grace said as they landed on a large mound of unobtanium. *Damn, if RDA could harvest this, our problems would be solved,* she thought, though she knew such a thing was impossible, and wouldn't solve shit.

Nicole didn't even take her gun out this time – N'deh and Grace were protection enough, though Onozuki didn't think so as he jumped out

with them. She rolled her eyes and went to look around, coming to look over the edge of the mountain. Thousands of metres below was the sea of green forest, interspersed with blue lakes here and there. And within the forest, standing out starkly like a cookie cutter, was the grey of Hell's Gate. They must have decimated hundreds of hectares of forest to make it.

She kept looking down, as large banshees flew. *So dragons do exist,* she thought, laughing at her inner joke as the great winged beasts flew below. They eyed her off with brilliant golden eyes, but didn't attack since she wasn't a threat. She just admired their incredible skin of blue, green and red.

Turning back around to see what Grace was doing, she found herself suddenly surrounded by a mist. It had come out of nowhere. *Odd* , Nicole thought initially, but then realised, everything on this planet would be odd to her.

But then, without warning, a mass array of slimy ropes emerged from the mist. Nicole frowned, looking up, and saw nothing before she was enveloped.

"N'deh, could you see if the helicopter has any vials for me please?" Grace asked, but she got a yell in response. And she knew perfectly well N'deh didn't yell. She whirled around, only to see Nicole being lifted off the ground. She was entangled, struggling in the wave of tentacle, moving across the mountaintop. She squirmed in pain, as the tentacles would have been charging her up with electric shocks. "Nicole!" Grace yelled.

Onozuki was first to properly react, drawing his gun, but she warned him off of it – "Don't fire, you idiot, that's not gonna solve anything!"

N'deh had other ideas. He drew his machete out of its sheath as the huge creature began to drag Nicole off. Below there was nothing but weightless fall to the death. And he wasn't going to reach her in time. "Nicole! Catch!" he called, throwing her the machete.

It was a good thing she had excellent reflexes, and Grace found herself thanking their lucky stars Nicole had a military background. She deftly caught the weapon by the handle, and began to try and hack at the translucent tentacles around her, which was hard – the pain was great, and though she'd been in a lot of painful situations, this was something new. *I didn't get training for this shit!* Nicole thought, grimacing as another zap ran through her, feeling like her skin was being torn open. Her human body would have been dead by now.

Grace ran like hell back to the helicopter, screaming at Trudy to fire it up. N'deh grabbed Onozuki by the collar, the trooper yelling in protest, but they had to move and he could get there faster than the human.

"Follow her!" Grace instructed Trudy, though the pilot didn't need to be told.

Nicole tried to hack at the tentacles that engulfed her, looking around wildly – and then she saw what it was that held her.

It was like an impossibly huge jellyfish, her observation based on images she'd seen back on Earth. There was a bell-like, transparent canopy that glistened in the sunlight – the body of it. And that was what Onozuki was trying to aim at again.

"What did I say before?" Grace yelled to him over the roar of the helicopter, snatching the gun out of his hand. "You shoot that, it's gonna explode like the Hidenburg. That's full of hydrogen gas!"

"Well what the fuck is it?" Onozuki retorted.

"They're aerocoelenterates, genus medusa." Her eyes were locked on the small, struggling blue form of Nicole, who was trying desperately to hack at the tentacles, which were tough and rubbery. And unfortunately, her struggling body caused some banshees to attack, seeing a helpless prey.

"This is not good," N'deh murmured, his ears going back. Grace swallowed, but nearly spat the saliva back out when the helicopter shook violently. Everyone's stomach lurched forward as the helicopter dropped several metres whilst Trudy struggled for control.

"Holy shit…" Onozuki gasped as a large blue talon clamped onto the side of the door. This was just not their day.

Nicole still had problems of her own as a banshee came dangerously close to her bare foot. She lunged out with the blade, tearing its wing to ribbons. She didn't get a chance to be apologetic for it as another painful buzz ran through her. She twisted her head around, trying to hack at another tentacle, and as she did, she saw what was attacking the helicopter.

A huge banshee, with red and yellow markings, easily double the size of the helicopter, had sunk its talon into the side of the open door, the other claw on the tail of it. But that was no ordinary banshee.

" *Toruk!* " N'deh exclaimed, his eyes wide with fear as he pulled Grace as far as he could from the door, and the menacing claw. As unexpectedly as it had arrived, it let them go and took off into the sunlight. But it was far from over.

"It sees us as a competing predator! Trudy, take evasive action – fast!" Grace yelled.

"I'm on it!" The helicopter went into a full dive down towards the forest.

Nicole watched as the creature folded its wings and dived down after the helicopter. They disappeared behind one of the mountains, and she knew at that moment that she was screwed. She had no knowledge of this planet, or these things, and the ones who did were gone from her vision. She could feel herself being lifted higher, though the creature was at the same altitude as before, and she realised – with horror – that she was being lifted to its wide mouth.

The open hole left little to the imagination. Fear and anger coursed through her, and she gave an almighty battle cry as she hacked with all her might at the tentacle again. A spray of violet liquid splattered onto her face, and she heard a screech as the limb fell into the depths of the forest, its grip on her shoulder going.

One down, twenty to go , she thought, but her first success had given her hope. As a military woman, she would never give up. She could pass any test a man could pass, and do it better.

She chopped at another appendage, hacking several times in the same spot, and another tentacle fell, letting go of her left arm. As she came closer to the mouth, she swung wildly at the bell-body of it. No fucking way was she being eaten by a jellyfish – what a way to go. She did not want that on her death certificate.

And Grace didn't want 'Death by Great Leonopteryx' on her certificate either, but it was looking that way. Trudy had moved them under the shelter of the trees, the large trees spread far enough from one another that she could easily get through, but it wasn't enough to throw off the beast. It gave an ear-piercing shriek before it slammed into the helicopter again, nearly knocking Onozuki out of it. Alarms blared through the cockpit and smoke rushed in – it had broken the tail.

There was no need for Trudy to say 'mayday' – they all knew it and there was no way that Hell's Gate could help them now. The helicopter crashed into the treetops, splinters and leaves flying everywhere as they spun towards the floor. It collapsed into a patch of mud, sending soil into the air. But apart from being stunned, N'deh having a blood nose, Trudy with bloody knees, everyone seemed to be all right.

" *Why do I spend time with you humans?* " N'deh grumbled with a quiet laugh as he wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

" *Because deep down, you love us,* " Grace murmured, coughing from the smoke and being winded from the crash.

" ' *Us' is an extremely broad term."* He was eyeing the trooper when he said it.

"That flying fuck!" Onozuki exclaimed. Yanking the gun off the door, he jumped out of the helicopter, into the muddy patch. He slogged his way to the rocks that surrounded the mud, and looked into the sky. He fired shots erratically, aiming for the creature that was flying away from the group. "You don't mess with humans!" he roared, specks of saliva flying from his mouth as he kept up the stream of bullets. He was so engrossed in his task that he didn't hear what Grace was shouting at him as she came out of the helicopter.

But the shadow ran over them. And before Onozuki could react –

WHAM!

Grace felt blood splatter across her face, and she heard a *plop* down in the mud after the bloodcurdling shriek faded. Wiping herself off, she slowly trudged over to the glass oxygen mask, and shook her head. N'deh came over to her, passing her the muddy rifle that had also fallen from the sky. She looked at him and shrugged, giving an exasperated sigh, similar to one a parent would use when their children disobeyed and got hurt because of it.

"I did try to tell him," she said, "they hunt in pairs."

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She hacked at the bell now, and was not prepared for the result.

The medusa gave a shriek as Nicole's machete ran right through the thin membrane, and she felt a rush of hydrogen in her face. And then they began to plummet down to the forest floor.

Similar to a balloon when gas was let out, the creature descended in sudden, jerky movements before settling and rushing downwards. Nicole was now glad for the tentacles that still held onto her – it was

the only thing saving her from falling completely to the floor and going splat.

The trees clawed up towards her, and she felt herself jerked to a stop as the medusa got caught on a branch. The sudden stop caused her machete to fly out of her hands, away from her down to the floor. She breathed out, looking down – it was a ten metre drop.

The deflated medusa hung limply in the trees, shrouding the leaves like a strange, slimy blanket. Nicole was able to pry herself out of the tentacles, which were no longer stinging her, and slide down to the floor.

She landed haphazardly, but was unhurt from that. She looked at her blue body, marred with dark marks like bruises from the medusa. *Fucking hell,* she thought, *it's my second day and this shit happens. How the hell am I going to survive three months?*

But that was what she was going to have to do. Not just for three months, but right now – survive.

There was no chance of Grace and N'deh being close by, and she assessed the situation. She was on an alien planet, with no training, no weapons, and no one to guide her.

She was the definition of 'fucked over'.

You're a woman – you can deal with blood gushing out every month, you can deal with this.

With that as her guiding thought, she shook herself off, and thought logically. *Your machete can't have gone too far. Find it.* Walking along the moss covered floor, she headed in the direction she thought it was. Pushing aside several low-hanging vines, she found it lying amongst strange, cone-like plants. They were coral in colour, and as tall as her. Picking up her machete, she looked at them, wondering if Grace had mentioned them during their walk – no, she

hadn't. Nicole gave it a sniff; it smelt like vanilla. Hesitatingly, she reached out and touched it with her index finger.

She jumped back with a start when it shrunk with a *pop!* back into the ground. Once she got over the initial shock, a smile came to her face. It was a defensive mechanism obviously, but it got her thinking. She needed some happiness in such a gloomy situation right now. So she touched another. And another. And when she touched the fourth, all the rest of them followed suit, like they were capable of conscious thought, and disappeared into the ground.

A warning trumpet alerted her that she had disturbed something.

"Oh not you again," she groaned, looking at the hammerhead titanothere that was eyeing her off, its head flaps rising high to make it look even bigger. There were about eight behind the one looking at her, and this one was small. It pawed at the ground, the whites of its eyes showing. She had no gun, and a machete wasn't going to do shit. *Stand your ground* .

The hammerhead gave another call, and charged at her, the ground shaking under its bulk.

In utter desperation and at a loss of what to do, Nicole waved her machete, and gave a loud, piercing shriek, running right back at the creature.

To her amazement, its head flaps went down, and it gave a scared whimper, backing away.

She grinned, feeling powerful. "Damn straight!" she laughed at it as it turned to run back to the herd. "Yeah! Get your punk ass back to mummy!"

Giving a smirk, she turned around, and realised that she wasn't what had caused the creature to run away.

A black, six-limbed creature, closely resembling a panther in body type, eyed her. Its mouth flaps rose in a growl, revealing incredibly sharp black fangs. This looked like something ripped directly from her nightmares. It rose its head to the sky, and gave an ear-shattering roar, before leaping over Nicole's head and charging at the hammerheads.

The ground shook with the weight of the herd as they ran, but the baby who had threatened Nicole wasn't fast enough. The apex predator launched itself into the air and took it down in one swoop. Its fangs sunk into the neck, finding the only unarmoured area of its body. When the predator turned around, thundering a call to announce its kill, she saw thick blood dripping from its fangs.

Her heart beat so fast in her chest she wondered if that thing could hear it. The minute it turned its head back to bury it into the hammerheads neck, she slowly stepped backwards, and then ran like she never had before, even when she had working legs.

"This place is like a goddamned roadrunner cartoon!" she cried to no-one in particular.

But someone had heard her. She didn't know it, but amber irises, like a cat's, watched her movements from the gloom of the forest. And it had been watching her for a long time.

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"Grace? We must move."

Her ears flickered as she heard N'deh's voice. She looked to see him watching her, his usually calm expression twisted with concern. She sighed, and glanced up to the sky. The blueness of it was turning to purple, and soon it would be night. The most beautifully deadly time.

The ears then went down, and she turned to her Na'vi companion. He tilted his head to the forest, and she knew he was right – they had to move. "I tried to protect her," she murmured softly.

He blinked once. "I know. And you did."

"We just saw her get carried off to God knows where. How did I protect her, pray tell?"

"You teach her this morning," he said simply in good English. "She know."

In three hours? Nicole wouldn't know shit. Grace knew that, and she knew N'deh knew that. They were just holding onto false hope, which was slipping through her fingers like water, no matter how much she cupped her hands.

She shook her head, and reluctantly followed him. Maybe, just maybe, they might find her on the way, but she was doubtful. "I better get the base psychiatrist ready to help with some serious stuff."

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Night. She knew it was coming and she hadn't wanted to think about it. She was alone at night. *Just my luck* , she thought.

She had torn off some of her top, so that it now looked like a crop top on her, as well as her pants so it was like she was wearing shorts, and with the material she tied it around a large stick. She still had a lighter in her pocket, and she dipped the crude torch into some sap that had collected at the base of a tree. She clicked the lighter on, and set it alight.

And she saw the enemies she knew she had had. A group of dog-like creatures, with bright green eyes and ferocious looking fangs, stalked her. They growled a threat when the fire came around.

Nicole sneered back at them. "I haven't got all goddamn night!" she told them, poking at one with the lit stick; it roared as the fire scorched its skin. She swiped with the machete in her left hand. "Come on!"

So they did.

One lunged at her neck, its four front legs out as it came at her, another at her bare feet, teeth sinking into her blue flesh. *Fuck you Grace, why did you tell me to take off my shoes?!* She ducked, sending the one who lunged at her neck flying into a tree, before whacking mercilessly at the one by her foot. The others, seeing their pack members hurt, lunged more at her. One went for the back of her knees and another aimed at her hip. The sharp puncture at her leg caused her to go down with a cry, and it was a miracle she kept her torch up off the mossy floor, else the whole forest would have gone off. She swung out with her machete, and heard the appalling sound that made her think of a butcher – she had cut one's head clean off. She swiped and hit wildly, hearing cries at times as she got one or two, but they just kept coming relentlessly. She was on her back, and she put the machete up in front of her face to hit away one that came at it, its mouth wide open as it aimed for her eyes. And though it went against her training, she began to close her eyes as the creature came for her. Maybe at least not watching her end would be less of a trauma…

THWACK!

The pain didn't come. Nicole arched her neck up to see the downed animal, twitching before laying still. Her eyes went wide as she saw the long, black stick coming out of it, pinning it to the ground. It had a fletching of feathers on the end. *Shit.*

She looked up to see a human-like figure fly through the air, another arrow being sent out and running through one creature's skull. Blood splattered the moss. The figure then turned and cracked its bow across one's head.

THWACK! CRUNCH!

The creatures who still survived surveyed their dead pack mates, and took off into the forest, terrified.

Nicole was breathing hard, blood running down her arm, though she wasn't even sure if it was her own or not. At this point, she didn't care. *Who is that?* she wondered, looking at her saviour.

And she knew that it wasn't human. She had known that the minute she saw the arrow. Just some illogical part of her brain had hoped that maybe it was. Or even N'deh – that would have been welcome.

But he wasn't N'deh. She looked up at him as he stood, looking around at the carnage, and she saw he was young. Maybe about her Avatar's age. He had a hard look on his face, a look that seemed to convey a knowledge of the world far more than a human would have at his age. He was tall and well-built, with a strange hairstyle that made her think of a Mohawk. He wore a loincloth of animal skin like N'deh, but he seemed to have more accessories than he did – he had a leather band around his middle, a more intricate knife strap, rope around his arm. And along his tail, he had rope bindings as well.

Slowly, Nicole stood up, looking at him in awe. He came closer to her, but it was as if she wasn't there as he reached down to take the torch effortlessly from her hands, and turned away. She realised what he was doing.

"No! Wait, stop - !"

Too late. With a swift movement he had dropped it into a pool of water, and it sizzled out. She rolled her eyes. *Fucking fantastic.*

But now she took in the world around her. What she had seen of the forest from Hell's Gate was like looking through a tinted window. Her mouth dropped open as she looked at the bright bioluminescent plants. She stepped on the moss and it lighted up at her touch. The ferns twinkled hues of purple and green. She could see flowers that glowed like mini lamps. It was here that the Na'vi was kneeling.

He was looking to one of the dogs, who was still twitching. He knelt down, and seemed to say some words, before digging his knife into

its neck. Absently, he seemed to stroke its leathery skin, before wiping his blade on the grass.

Better say something , Nicole thought. She cleared her throat, and walked over to him like she was approaching a wild animal. "Hello?" she asked. He didn't respond; just kept running his fingers over its skin. "Um… Hey. I uh, I just wanted to say thank you for saving me. Heh." She gave him a smile.

He glanced up at her, his ears flickering as he heard the words, but he said nothing.

"Do you speak English?"

No response.

"Well anyway, I just wanted to say thanks. I mean, I woulda been screwed if you hadn't come along – "

He cut her off as he stood up, shouldering his bow. He looked at her for a long moment, and she got the strange sensation that he was staring into her very soul. He then moved off.

And she could see her last chance of survival walking away. She quickly got to her feet, limping after him due to the animal's bite. "Hey, wait up!" she called, trying to keep up with his quick gait. She pushed herself after him, ignoring the pain that came with every step, like she was walking on glass, before reaching out to grab at his elbow to make him stop. "I just wanted to say thank you for – "

He turned around so quickly and pulled his elbow out of her grasp so fast she practically fell on her face. She put her hands out for a safe fall, lighting up the moss. As she looked at the ground, she could see his blue feet come under her face, seeing the four toes that he had.

"Do not thank."

She slowly looked up at the looming figure. She saw his brow knitted together in a frown, his topaz eyes flashing a fury.

"You do not thank for this," he told her slowly. "This is sad. Very sad only."

She swallowed, knowing that an alien was literally right in front of her, talking down to her. And he was stronger than her, amazingly – she had felt him grab his elbow back. She knew she was on the tip of the knife and she had to be careful with what she said. "Well, I – I'm sorry – "

"This is all your fault, they did not need to die," he murmured lowly, and dangerously.

But now she frowned. *Excuse you* , she thought. "My fault?" she countered. "How the hell was that my fault, they attacked me – "

"Your fault!" he snarled, his foot going to stand on her hand. She gasped in shock more than pain – he had kept it light, but it had the threat of going harder, and that had clearly been his intention. So she knew what he wanted – an apology.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, looking up at him sincerely. His catlike nose crinkled, and his frown stayed frozen in place. "But… what should I have done then?"

He made a clicking sound with his tongue, and she took that to mean a Na'vi version of 'tsk'. "Rub your body with plant. They cannot smell." The weight on her hand left, and her Na'vi helper turned around to leave again.

Nicole got back onto her feet, watching his retreating figure. *Tread carefully, Nicole. You will need him – Quaritch would need him. And you also need to survive right now.* "Wait so – if it was my fault, why did you save me then?"

That had got his attention. He stopped in his tracks, and slowly turned to look at her. His expression seemed softer than before as he focused on her. "You are brave," he told her. "I see you, with the *angtsìk.* " *What the hell is angtsìk?* she thought, but got her answer. "You stood your ground against them. It was brave."

She smiled at him, liking the praise she was getting. But then he scowled.

"Brave, but stupid – they could kill."

And then he was walking away again.

"Wait! Hang on a second!" Nicole called after him, limping over to him. He turned around at the sound of her heavy footfalls. "Think this through, buddy. You think I'm a menace, yeah?" He blinked, and she wasn't sure if he was agreeing, or just blinking as an involuntary bodily function. Why couldn't they nod like humans and save the confusion? She put her hands on her hips, giving a shrug. "Well I probably shouldn't be left out here alone. Who knows what else I might harm?"

He looked at her, seeming to consider this. *Good, almost there!* she thought.

"I mean, I wouldn't want to kill some more of your forest friends. You should take me to your tribe, and teach me."

She'd gone too far with that. He gave a low growl, and muttered something in his language that needed no translation from the tone. "No," he said in English then, giving an agitated flick of his tail. "Go back."

She gave a nervous laugh. "Ah, well… see I can't really go back." He ground his teeth together. "I mean, I got separated from N'deh and Grace and – "

The names seemed to bring some recognition to the Na'vi, whose ears pricked at them. Of course he'd know Grace if he could speak English – she must have taught him. She continued slowly. " – so help would be much appreciated, please and thank you."

He breathed out, and seemed about to open his mouth to give his answer, when he stopped. He glanced up at the sky. She followed his gaze.

There she saw wafting tendrils, white and glowing, coming down towards her. They gave her terrifying flashbacks to the medusa, even though they didn't have such long tentacles nor were anywhere as big – they were the size of her hand. And they were coming right for her.

One landed just above her shoulder, another by her hand. That was the one she whacked away at, and the Na'vi's hand flew out to catch hers.

"No!" he said sharply, grabbing her small wrist in his larger hand to guide it away. *"Atokirina!* "

She frowned, thoroughly confused, and hit at another one that came near her neck. He did the same thing again, and she realised she just had to keep still.

They were like mosquitoes that didn't bite. They swarmed around her, dozens and dozens, all finding a place to land until she was covered in them like a glowing coat. They felt cool on her skin, like several air conditioners were blasting at her. "So, uh, what are they…?" she asked him.

He was silent for a moment, and she realised he was mesmerised by the sight. " *Atokirina* ," he said again, quietly. His voice sounded melodic. "A very pure spirit…"

I have no idea what the hell you are talking about , Nicole thought, looking at him in a hope he could elaborate. He didn't.

And then they flew off. In a large group, at the same time, they floated off into the night. The Na'vi seemed amazed by the sight. Nicole still didn't know what had just happened. But now he was looking at her in a way that could only be described as respect. He was just inches off bowing to her, she thought. She wet her lips, feeling awkward at him staring at her like she belonged on a pedestal. "Um, what just happened?" she asked softly.

He opened his mouth to respond, before his eyes looked at her shoulder. And his eyes widened. "You are hurt," he stated, though he had seen that before. She glanced at the gaping wound on her shoulder, and realised that it had been her who was bleeding, and not residue from the animals.

He turned around to some leaves behind him, looking around before seizing several dark green long ones in his hand. He turned back to her, and gestured for her to hold out her arm, which she did. He began to bind her wound in the leaves. *Thank you atokatrina, or whatever the hell you were* , she thought as he tended to her.

"Can I ask your name?" she asked him as he helped her.

"Ja'kanhe Eytukan Tsan'ten," he responded in a flurry of words.

She blinked spastically, before giving a laugh. "Um, a little slower please?"

He glanced up, his eyes locking onto her own. His expression seemed softer. "Ja'kanhe," he said simply.

"Jak-anhey?" she replied, though not as smoothly as he had said it. He blinked slowly which she took to mean 'Yes'. He obviously thought it was close enough. After she said it, the name sounded familiar.

And then it clicked. *The Lorax.* "You knew Grace? Grace Augustine?"

He made no sound, but he had slowed down in applying the leaves to her arm. She figured she had touched a nerve.

"I'm Nicole Moakley," she told him, giving him a smile. "It's nice to meet you, Ja'kanhe."

He finished patching up her wound, and then tilted his head behind him. "Ney-cole," he said, mispronouncing her name as well, but since he hadn't held it against her, she didn't do so for him. "Follow."

There was always that rule to never follow strangers, but he didn't seem a threat – why would he have helped her if he was going to be one? She limped beside him, so he slowed his walk as they stepped over roots and the glowing moss. She looked at the intriguing plants. Some looked like large, gleaming bacteria in their shape. She ran her fingers along them, seeing them brighten at her touch.

"So, where are we going?" she asked him.

He said nothing for a moment, and she wondered if that was just a thing he did – took several moments before he answered. When he finally did, he simply said, "Home."

Her ears perked. "You mean your home?" she asked as they traversed over a log, the forest floor half a metre below them.

And that had been when the rope entwined around her legs, catching around her ankles. Nicole felt her body going forward while her feet went backwards, and she yelped as she fell onto the ground below.

Chapter Three

Thanks for the readership, everyone – it's lovely to get positive feedback. I am having a lot of fun writing this. And oh, what do you think of the cover?

Chapter Three

"Shit!" Nicole exclaimed as she looked behind her to see her legs strung together with a rope. She quickly sat up, trying to undo it. It wasn't a case of her getting caught in a vine. This rope was made by hands – Na'vi hands. It was slim and delicately perfect, with three blades of dried grass plaited together. She was not expecting it to be so strong, and she desperately clawed at it, trying to loosen the tangle.

There was the trumpeting call of a direhorse, and she looked up to see three clearing a fallen log in swift jumps. Their four front hooves looked formidable, and she had just taken off the binding to be able to scramble away, drawing the machete she still had. Her eyes widened as she saw that these horses were not a wild herd – there were Na'vi upon them. And behind her came more on their own feet, drawing their bows and aiming directly at her. The animals' hooves pounded the moss floor right near her, but came to a screeching halt. They were so close she could feel their hot breath down her neck. As the reality of her situation dawned on her, she quickly dropped the machete. There were eight of them, and one of her. She had never been fantastic at maths, but it didn't take a scientist to know what that meant.

"I'm unarmed, guys!" she called, not knowing if they understood.

But someone did. She watched in relief as a shadowed figure leapt from the upper log, and fell soundlessly to the floor. Ja'kanhe looked around at the ones surrounded them, and said something in Na'vi – it sounded harsh from how his words cut through the air. His topaz

eyes pierced every single one of them, and to her amazement, whatever he had said made them lower their weapons. His eyes focused on the three on the direhorses, and he snarled something to them. They didn't look as confident as they had a few moments before, and she felt the hot breath disappear from her neck as the creatures were commanded, seemingly effortlessly, to back away.

Ja'kanhe's expression smoothed out, and he looked at her. "Follow," he said in English. She nodded, knowing she was in no place to disagree. Automatically, she reached down to retrieve her machete, but found it whipped away from her under her feet; one of the Na'vi not on a direhorse had taken it off of her. She frowned at him as he aimed it at her – her own weapon, the bastard – trying to get her to move, before there was another snarl from the one who had saved her, and she was allowed to walk without a threat.

She didn't know where they were going, but Ja'kanhe seemed to be the only one who had a positive attitude towards her, so she stuck close to him. But without Grace to translate, she had no idea what was being said. Were they only keeping her safe for a sacrifice? Tribes apparently did that. She had no idea if it was true, seeing as there were no tribal communities or reservations back on Earth. All she could hope for was the best as they ran over the glowing moss, the direhorse's hooves amazingly not churning the ground to a pulp. They seemed to just flow as effortlessly as the Na'vi did, like they were unconstricted by gravity. She found herself quite capable of keeping up with Ja'kanhe, though she grimaced every now and again if something sharp on the forest floor pierced her – what had Grace said about baby footsies? She definitely had them, and the attack from the other creatures was still hurting; he hadn't bound her punctured foot. As they ran, she asked him what those creatures were.

" *Nantang* ," he told her simply, and not another word was spoken for he slowed down to an easy walk.

And then she saw why. Before her eyes, she saw the largest tree she had ever seen. There was no way, even hundreds of years

before when they were common, that an Earth tree would have been that colossal. She had to almost lean backwards to see the absolute top of it. But it was inside that was the real shock – there were hundreds of Na'vi, and all their eyes were trained right on her. They were all eyeing Ja'kanhe happily as he walked in, before all of them shot her such dark glances that she was glad looks couldn't kill. *How useless is an Avatar then if they know immediately what I am? I thought I was supposed to blend in?*

But then the party had completely stopped, in the midst of all the Na'vi, and she found herself staring into the weathered face of an older Na'vi, who gave her a crinkled smile.

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Night had engulfed them faster than Grace wanted to admit, and this time the bioluminescent plants failed to make her feel jovial being around them. All she could think about was Nicole. Was she alive? Was she dead? *Oh my God, what if she is? I don't need another Hegner on my hands… Fuck.* How strange that someone she had known for such a short amount of time was having such an impact on her. But since she'd been in her Avatar, this new driver had seemed… different. Everyone was different when they connected with their second body, but this was something else. She was more easy-going it seemed. And perhaps that had caused a fast yet strong holding bond between the two women. But she didn't know if she was just stressed Parker would use this as another excuse to shut down the Avatar program… *Oh please, Nicole. Please be okay. Please let us find you before anyone else does.*

She was trekking through the hunting trails made by the Na'vi, keeping her eyes peeled for any inconsistencies to what she knew. N'deh was doing the same, but he was far more accurate than her, and he was able to point out two sets of footprints on the moss before them after searching fruitlessly for over two hours.

She followed the direction his finger showed her, and spied the deep imprint of a five-toed foot, and right beside it, a four-toed one.

Her breath caught in her throat. *Oh shit.* This could go one of two ways, and she was unfortunately thinking the latter. *Why would they want to help us? Eytukan would kill her immediately!*

" *My brother would keep her safe.* " N'deh had been reading Grace's thoughts as easily as if he had access to her mind. She breathed out slowly and looked at him with a look that said, 'You so sure about that?' He blinked slowly once. " *You know Eytukan. He would assess the situation carefully before anything was decided.* "

" *N'deh, please think that through – he'd see how strange she is. You yourself said that! It would be the first thing they noticed.* "

He hesitated for a moment, looking at the two footprints. He bent down and sniffed them, before he blinked again. When he cast his eyes back to her, she could see some light within them. " *I don't think you realise who found her.* "

" *What? Who?* "

He didn't get to answer her. There was a rustling amongst the bushes behind them, and two large ferns were pushed aside as a Na'vi female came to stand before them. She was taller than Grace, with a soft, round face. And she recognised her immediately, for she had taught her when she was a young girl. Whenever she had done her school work, or indeed any work around the clan, she had always kept a part of her tongue curled out. A habit of hers, so much so that, coupled with the roundness of her face, Grace had taken to calling her 'Pumpkin', which stuck with the children – in a term of endearment rather than mockery. But now, this was no classroom, and the proper name would be more appropriate.

" *Peyral* ," Grace murmured, and the woman blinked.

N'deh touched his fingers to his forehead and then extended them out to her; she did the same, before focusing on Grace. To her surprise, the same movement was done, and she only had to reply.

" *It seems we have someone who belongs to you* ," Peyral told her in that softly spoken tone she always had.

She gave a little gasp of relief and delight, and she felt N'deh's tail on the back of her bare calf – a touch of support – before he asked, " *Can we come collect her?* "

" *Of course. Everyone's waiting for you.* " There was a flick of her tail to the right; 'Follow me'.

Peyral turned tail and walked back through the ferns, as silently as if there had been no disturbance in the forest. Compared to her and N'deh, Grace felt as if she were a *palulukan* set loose in Quaritch's gym – it sounded as if every loud noise that could be made, was being made. But at least she knew she did it better than Nicole.

Thank you for being alive , she thought. God, another death in the Avatar program would have been doom. Another death at RDA would have been some form of doom. And then she remembered what had happened just a few hours ago. She was going to get chewed out for that one, she could just see it, even when it wasn't her fault.

Despite coming here many times, the Omaticayan Hometree never ceased to draw a breath from her. The huge vastness of it... It was probably a good contender for many sky scrapers back on Earth. She could just see the absolute top of it, some leaves fluttering down in the breeze, but it would take a long time before they settled to the bottom with how tall they were. She could hear the *ikrans* , she could smell the roaring fire inside, but most of all, she could feel the Na'vi presence. Her heart was beating so fast and so hard it almost made her have a true bodily shudder – excitement, anticipation and fear all mixed made a potent combination of an emotion.

N'deh, once more, seemed to sense her feelings. " *You will be fine* ," he murmured to her. He stopped her before they went in, and when Peyral turned to check on them, he glanced towards the inside of the

tree to wave her on. Then he turned back to his companion. " *Everything will be fine.* "

She gave a shaky breath, and forced a smile, though she wasn't entirely certain it was for his benefit or her own. It slowly faded off her face. " *N'deh, Eytukan and Mo'at –* "

" *They know it wasn't your fault. They've known that for a long time.* " His hand came towards her face, and at first she thought he was going to place it on her cheek, but he only moved a small strand of hair that had escaped her headband back underneath its binds. " *It was just too much of a risk.* "

For a whole year? some part of her brain wanted to retort, but she kept silent. Now was not the time to poke holes when she was right there. So close, yet so far. She could ask questions on the technicalities of the ruling later on.

He blinked once at her, and then the two of them turned to continue following Peyral. The whole clan had gathered in the lower floor – they did all know. Many gave her smiles, or looks of encouragement, but what really brought that sense of homecoming, the feeling that everything would be all right, was the chorus of " *Mother!* "

Grace's ears perked up, and she figured at first it was just several children calling for their mother, before she saw some of the clan group move aside. They flooded at her like a wave in the ocean; all the little blue children she had taught at the school. They had grown up so much… She felt a lump in her throat as they ran towards her, their feet pounding across the ground, sounding like a stampede and not caring for remaining silent as they would need to in the forest – they just wanted to get to her. The whole group swarmed around her, and she smiled the largest smile she had in a long time.

" *Children!* " she exclaimed as some hugged her around the middle, and others went to her hair, combing their fingers through the strands. She knelt down, her knees feeling the cool, compacted soil from years of being trodden on. " *Oh, how I missed you…* "

" *We missed you!* " came the response.

There was some laughter around the rest of the clan, and she knew it then – they had missed her. She'd missed them. More than they'd ever know. The hands that ran through her hair, the excited laughter… *Please don't let this be a dream* , she begged some unknown source. *Please don't let these past two days be a dream. Please let it be true that I'm here with them, and that Nicole really did come.*

Nicole! The realisation of exactly why she was here in the first place ran into her mind, and she slowly stood up from the group of children, still letting one of the young ones hold her hand. Her standing up had obviously been the signal, for she saw the young woman, dressed in torn human fashion, with messy hair and dirty skin. The newest Avatar had looked as if she were being electrocuted by the medusa again, she was so uncomfortable, but upon seeing Grace she seemed so thankful. And she was standing next to… *Holy shit.*

Ja'kanhe, Eytukan and Mo'at all gazed at her, their shimmering gold orbs watching her closely. Nicole looked so out of place as she stood next to them, a little off to the side. Grace had no idea who to go to first, but her learner went over to her. Now that she was closer, she could see Nicole's arm wrapped in leaves. Worry coursed through her like water through a riverbed, so powerfully it shook her. But that was coupled with relief, and she did something she never expected to do – she enfolded her arms around the young woman in a hug.

Nicole responded, hugging her mentor back. "I'm fine," she murmured; Grace breathed out in relief, pulling back and nodding, before she looked back to the leaders.

Eytukan's weathered face was inscrutable as he watched her. *"Grace Augustine. I'm glad you're safe* ," he told her, and she knew she needn't worry whether he was being facetious – the Na'vi were rarely mocking. She blinked once at him in return. Even after so

many years, and with so many connections, she was still unsure of herself around the leaders at times.

" *Thank you, Eytukan, son of Taron* ," she replied in the correctly formal way.

He seemed pleased. His tail flicked over towards Nicole, but he didn't look at her – perhaps so she didn't know that what was being said was about her. She may not know the actual language, but body language conveyed more than anything, especially with the Na'vi; one just had to know what to look for. And she wouldn't know all the tail gestures. " *We found your student. She's… very interesting.* "

Oh fuck Nicole, what did you do? was the first thing that went through her mind. The second thing that went through her mind was that that was effectively an exact imitation of what N'deh had said earlier that day. " *I thank you for noticing,* " was all she could think to reply.

His much younger mate, Mo'at, joined into the conversation. " *Based on what we've heard from Ja'kanhe, she's very brave.* "

At the mention of his name, Ja'kanhe's ears brushed through the air, and he glanced properly at Grace; it was the first time they had laid eyes on one another in over a year. If things had been different, she knew that they would have hugged one another, and reminisced and laughed about all the years past. But if things had been different, she never would have had a reason to leave them at all.

" *I'm glad to hear it,* " Grace replied, now finding herself unsure of where this was going as she watched Eytukan and Mo'at again.

Eytukan gave her a warm smile, and she felt herself relax. *Maybe N'deh is right.* " *Well, we would like you both to stay with the clan tonight – safer, you understand.* "

That hug that Nicole had gained from Grace was well-founded. The scientist looked to the marine, completely bewildered by what must

have happened. She knew she would get a chance for an answer however, as Mo'at turned to Ja'kanhe to tell him that he would be looking after the newcomer; he blinked in acquiescence.

"So, what the hell just happened?" Nicole hissed to Grace in reliable English.

"We just got invited to dinner with the clan. So now I must ask you," she began, steering her out of sight as many of the members began to head towards the large fire pit to the side, and the royal family conferred together. It gave them a chance to talk without being scrutinised. "What happened out there?"

And as Nicole told her all the problems she'd encountered – the death of the medusa, the hammerhead titanotheres and the weird panther thing ("Thanator, or *palulukan* according to the Na'vi – it translates to 'Dry mouth bringer of fear'," Grace informed), she found herself just as amazed as Ja'kanhe and his family had seemed. *How on earth are you still functioning?* was all she could think. *Marine survival skills be damned – Quaritch nearly lost his life first day on the job. Though you were in your Avatar body, still…*

"Now how did you get here?" came the next question. "Last I saw of you, you and N'deh were on the verge of being knocked for six by a fucking huge banshee."

" 'Great Leonopteryx', or *toruk* ." The rest of the clan had effectively moved to the fire, and she knew they were running late, but she didn't want to have this conversation around the Na'vi; some could understand, some could not, and for those who couldn't she feared it would be very rude to be using their own language around them constantly. But she made sure to try and curb it off; she could see Ja'kanhe in the distance, waiting for Nicole. "We crash landed. Onozuki is dead."

"Shit. You're kidding, right? What happened?"

She grunted. "He was a fool. Tried to shoot at it when they hunt in pairs. And this is why you must listen to me."

"All right then, teacher, riddle me this: how did you get here?"

At this, Grace couldn't help but give a droll smile. *I love explaining this* . Mainly because of the varied reactions. Norm wouldn't have needed an explanation, she knew. She found herself thanking someone for not making him come with them. She didn't know why, exactly, but she found it easier with just the young woman. She touched Nicole's shoulder, gesturing towards where Ja'kanhe was waiting for her, and elucidated as they walked. But she knew she had to keep it simple without going into too much detail of the biology – one because the marine had no science background, and two because she herself wasn't entirely sure on the fine points. "Ja'kanhe told the clan while you were out in the forest, and then Pumpkin – ah, sorry, Peyral – came to pick us up. And now we're here."

As she predicated, the expression she got in return was one of incredulity. "Wait, what? How – how the hell did he let the clan know? He's not packing a tablet or a phone or any other communication device!"

That's what you think . Giving a knowing smile, she nudged the young woman with her forearm, and tilted her chin towards the young prince, who blinked at both of them as they arrived. "I will see you at dinner," she told them. And with that, she left them, Nicole blinking after her rapidly.

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She was so dazed as she followed Ja'kanhe whilst he took her up the staircase first. 'Staircase' was an extremely loose term – they were poles that jutted out from the tree's trunk at random intervals for footholds, with a large gap underneath, and it was a game of moving quickly else risking falling right through. Nicole hadn't used her legs in many years, and though they had muscle mass in this

body, it was still a full body shock, and she could feel the muscles shuddering in protest as she willed them to jump from log to log.

He led her to a small chamber upstairs. The whole of Hometree was honeycombed with little sections and spaces, some large some small. She looked all around it, her eyes looking in every nook and cranny, until Ja'kanhe pushed her towards one.

"You need clothes," he explained as he opened one of several woven grass baskets within the alcove. At first she was insulted – *what's wrong with my human clothes? Grace is still wearing hers!* But as she looked down at her grotty and war-torn garments, she knew he was right. But before he did what he said, he went to the side of the room, returning with a large wooden bowl filled with fresh water. Reaching into one basket, he pulled out a rag, and dipped it in before beginning to wipe her face. She wished he had just told her he was going to do that, for she felt so much like a child as he did. He rubbed down her face, but as he got down to her shoulders, she asked if she could do that herself. He blinked, and let her wipe down her limbs, getting rid of most of the grime.

He then opened one of the baskets again. He at first passed her a simple loin cloth made of a soft fabric, and then a simple top garment that would just rest over her breasts. *Oh sweet heavenly Lord. Even lingerie models have more covering than that.*

"Um… no offense, but do you have anything less… revealing?" she queried.

He tilted his head, thoroughly confused. "What wrong with this?" he asked.

She really didn't want to take advantage of his hospitality, or anything, but she had seen the Na'vi women coming into the clan. They all had small breasts, sometimes ones that were barely there. Meanwhile, she looked down at her more sizeable ones, and knew that she couldn't walk out there like that. Even though the clan were minimalist in their fashion, she was not prepared for this. And she

was uncertain of how to say all that to Ja'kanhe so he understood, let alone wasn't insulted. "May I?" she asked politely, and he blinked once, moving aside from the basket so she could scrounge through. He watched, intrigued, as she carefully removed layers of clothing within it, until she found a long leather strap. "That's for stomach," he told her as she measured it against her chest.

She breathed out slowly, sending him a sarcastic smirk. "No breasts – no opinion," she told him simply. Ja'kanhe's ears pointed forward, and he looked like he was about to warn her against it, but then thought better of it. She had to get changed now, and she stared at him for a long moment, trying to will him to get the hint; he just stared back, as still as a statue. "Do you mind?"

"No." He said, before perhaps it clicked – maybe Grace had told them that humans were different in their bareness, but whatever it was he looked quite startled, and then turned and left her to change. *Good, I didn't want to explain that* , she thought as she stripped off. She tied the loincloth around her hips and bound her breasts with the leather. She always wore tight fitting bras in the military, making it easier for her to run and jump; she had felt their recoil whenever she had launched herself on their stairs. And it was the comfortableness, and the reassurance that she wasn't on display, that allowed her to ignore the surreptitious glances of the clan when she sat down with Ja'kanhe amongst them for dinner.

Grace was across the large fire, sitting beside N'deh. She was licking some sauce off her fingers and waved at her, before taking in her clothing. But she seemed to understand the reasoning behind it.

Ja'kanhe sat beside her, and first passed her a plate that seemed to be made out of the hip bone of some animal, covered with a leaf. On top of the leaf was some type of marinated meat, which she took. She hadn't realised how hungry she was. She took a bite, tasting the tender yet stringy texture. It reminded her of what they had sometimes at the cafeteria. "Is this hexapede?" she asked him.

He blinked, but corrected her with "Yerik". She repeated it, but he got her to keep doing it until she said it in the proper accent, which was surprisingly hard. Once he was satisfied, he passed her another plate, this one filled with small brown pasta shaped food. She took one, and tasted it; it was sweet and soft, with the consistency of a marshmallow. And it tasted divine, like baked chicken in a type of garlic sauce.

"What do you call this?" she asked, thanking him as he passed her some more.

"It is *teylu* ," he told her, and she repeated it, this time getting it correct on her first try. "I think, in your language, beetle larvae?"

She robotically stopped the movement of the fifth one to her mouth as she looked at the prince. He didn't seem to notice her sudden discomfort, and now passed her a bowl of water to drink. She tried to think logically; she'd only grown uneasy at the mention of the name – it still tasted the same. Holding that as her thought process, she just continued to eat, before she felt eyes on her.

She had known everyone was looking at her the moment she came to sit down, but this felt different. She glanced across the area, seeing Ja'kanhe's parents, but beside them was someone she hadn't noticed previously. She was a devastatingly beautiful Na'vi girl. Even being human, Nicole had to admit that. She didn't look much older than perhaps eighteen. Her black hair was in braids that ran down below her shoulders, her actual body a perfect hourglass shape. She had an incredible diamond-shaped face, with high cheekbones – ones that Earth models would have spent hundreds of thousands upon to achieve surgically.

But all this beauty was lost upon her with the murderous stare she held as she looked right at Nicole. Everyone had been slightly wary, it was true, and were still staring at her from time to time, stealing glances, but no one was looking at her with such malevolence. So, she did what she always did in those situations; she stared back, her brow creasing in a scowl.

It was the wrong thing to do, for the female bared her teeth, sending a low growl that was still audible to Nicole from across the room. And it wasn't only loud enough for her to hear – Ja'kanhe's head snapped up and he looked back at the girl, only now making her drop her ferocious frown.

"Who the hell is that?" Nicole asked.

He turned the glower he had used on the female now to her; she realised she had been rude. And due to it, she didn't get an answer.

As dinner drew to a close, the fire's embers dying down, many clan members came to help tidy up. Even Grace was amongst them as she and N'deh began collecting up the plates for cleaning. But Ja'kanhe tapped her shoulder with his forefinger, and tipped his chin towards the staircase once more.

They walked along the darkened corridors, a soft blue glow coming from a type of torch that was propped up here and there against the wooden walls. They came to a large open space, and she saw hundreds of hammocks. They were made out of some plant, and he had to demonstrate how they lay in them, and touched the top of it to let it curl around them. It was like a strange, open-aired sleeping back that went over their heads. *Actually, kind of like a less claustrophobic link room* , she thought, smiling at her own little joke.

Ja'kanhe noticed her smile, and asked what was funny. "Nothing," Nicole said, before she realised she owed him a little something. "Thank you, by the way. I know you didn't like me saying it, but I feel I need to."

He regarded her for a long moment, those sun-kissed eyes making her slightly shiver with how long he looked at her. "You are welcome," was all he said, before the eyes closed and he drifted off to sleep.

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It didn't feel like sixteen hours of being under when she opened her eyes, but soon the drowsiness, and the pins and needles in her body began to settle in as she became aware of them. She groaned, pushing up the top of the link chamber, and pulling herself up to stretch. She looked at the time upon the large tablet – 10:30 pm. *Wow.*

The link beside her opened up, and Grace brought herself up like a zombie, stretching and cracking her back. "Gawd, what a day!" she exclaimed with a yawn. *That's it? 'What a day'?* was all Nicole could think. She didn't properly know what to think after the strange and fascinating day.

She got herself back into her wheelchair, and Grace went to get them some warm milk to help this body settle down for sleep. Taking the warm mug from her was obviously an invitation in Grace's mind to chat. "You and Ja'kanhe seem to get along well."

Nicole shrugged dismissively, taking a sip of the hot liquid. "He is quite nice."

"By the way, you may have started a fashion trend with wearing a stomach band around your boobs."

She gave a brief laugh. "C'mon, you really wanted me to walk out there with just a necklace of feathers? Have you seen my boobs?"

"Well what size are you?"

She placed the mug to her lips, taking a sip and saying it into the white fluid, "Double D."

"Oh, now you go straight to hell!" Grace laughed, straightening her lab coat. "I'm only C."

The two now chortled together, finding camaraderie in comparing sizes. If there was one way to know if a woman was completely comfortable around another it was if they spoke candidly in such a

way. It was in this state that Norm walked into the science labs, and it didn't take a genius to know he looked pissed. But he was now intrigued by what Grace had said. "What are you two talking about?" he asked, his curious nature winning over his ire.

Automatically, Nicole said, "Secret women's business." The two women shared a knowing smile. She had always said that term when military men asked what she had been talking about with another woman, and it never failed.

It clearly worked on academics as well, as Norm's face went through a flurry of emotions – concern, surprise, interest, disgust – before he straightened up. "So you guys were down a long time."

Something about talking about breast size must have warped their minds, for they both said at the same time, "That's what she said!" before exploding into fits of giggles. Grace was clutching her sides she was laughing so hard, before extending her hand out to Nicole's for a satisfying high five.

Norm rolled his eyes. Remembering herself, she calmed down. "Right, right. Sorry, Norm. Did you come here to ask for something?"

"Yeah!" he said, looking right at Grace. "Selfridge has been up in arms to talk to you both and I had to expressly forbid him to undoing your link chambers. And now it's too late because he's gone to bed and upon doing so, I quote, 'Get those little birds into my office by 8 tomorrow or maybe I ought to just turn off the electricity to the science labs'."

Both their happy expressions vanished in an instant.

"What happened out there, guys?" Norm asked, clearly peeved he hadn't been there. *Well you ought to have been around when I gave the offer to Nicole* , Grace thought irritably. Instead, he'd been off playing basketball with some of the other Avatars, and they had had to get moving.

She had not been impressed with Norm from the moment she met him. She had thought he was the lesser of two evils when she saw him standing next to Nicole, but now she found the reverse. Norm might be smart – he might have the knowledge of the clan, he might have the language skills – but the leaders had seen something in Nicole. And now it was like a light had been turned on in a dark room and she could see clearly. Now every time Norm opened his mouth, she got the shuddering urge to slap him, and she really didn't have a true logical explanation of why. 'Nicole got into the clan' seemed so petty. Perhaps she was comparing what would have happened if he had been out there with them – he'd be dead instead. And *that* was what was getting to her. Nicole, having no real knowledge of the planet, had survived three animal attacks, befriended Ja'kanhe, and really… that was all she truly needed. Norm would have been a mass of bones that a *palulukan* was cleaning its teeth with.

Nicole cleared her throat. "Well, where do we start?"

Grace gestured for them to walk out the doors. "Come on, you two," she said as they strolled – in Nicole's case, rolled – out of the lab. "But Nicole and I can't stay up late – clan life starts early." And that statement gave her all she had needed; Norm's face crumpled like a piece of paper as it dawned upon what was just said. The xenobotanist gave him a wink before opening the doors with her thumbprint and walking through with them.

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Nicole felt herself being shaken awake early that morning. Glancing at the large screen in the room, the time said '4:39'. *Are you fucking kidding, Grace?* was what she had wanted to ask. Clan life couldn't start that early, surely. Her eyes burning, she slowly looked up, to see that the person staring down at her was not the redhead she had come to know.

Instead, Trudy was over her, pulling on her sleeping shirt. "Come on, girlie, up, up!" she said softly, not wanting to wake the others around them.

She gave a wide yawn, fighting against her eyelids and willing them to stay open. "What's going on?" she asked sleepily.

"Parker wants to see you. Immediately."

As they had walked with Norm the night before, regaling the tales of the day, much to his annoyance, she had finally placed who Parker was. "He's the passive-aggressive head administrator of RDA," he had told her, seeming to question how intelligent she really was if she hadn't even known that. She had pierced him with a deadly gaze.

Now Trudy ushered her to get dressed, telling her to forgo the shower in order not to be late. "He wants you there at 5. Now come on!"

There was little she could do to protest, so she quickly stripped off her holey sleepwear to a more presentable top, and due to the time she held her tongue as Trudy helped slip on her pants. As she got ready, she wondered if they were going to talk to her and Grace about being in the clan. Following her outside, they went briskly down the corridor, through the eerily quiet science labs and then to the office, where there was some human activity.

Inside, there was Quaritch, who looked at her as if they had had no contact previously; a lightly built man with dark hair, who looked around the room as if there were assassins in every corner; a young woman hiding behind a camera, who looked vaguely familiar; and then a shorter, grumpy looking man with cropped red hair. Grace wasn't there. She felt like a child who had had their security blanket taken away. *Oh shit, are they about to rake me over the coals for what happened with Wainfleet?* The thought just occurred to her, but she stifled her nerves; no one looked mad.

The last one who she had been inspecting looked right at her. "Good morning. Sorry we woke you so early." He strode over, bending down – even though he was short; she resisted the urge to send her eyes

up to the ceiling – to shake her hand. "I'm Parker Selfridge. I'm sorry we haven't met before."

"Pleasure's mine," Nicole said politely, though inside she was doing her best not to snap at him. She hated being woken up, and it left her wondering what was going on. *What was so important that it couldn't wait?*

Parker gave her a smile, straightening up, before gesturing around him. "I know you've met Colonel Miles Quaritch, and this is Doctor Hegner, a xenoanthropologist?" he questioned, to which the lightly built man gave a careful nod. "He's one of the Avatar drivers." And she couldn't be sure, but she thought she saw Hegner's eye twitch at the mention of the word 'Avatar'. "And Marcia De Los Santos, our freemedia officer."

Nicole focused on Marcia, trying to place the dark skinned woman with highlighted hair. With half her face obscured by the camera as she panned it around the room, it was hard to tell. And then she realised. "I know you! You were the past news anchor for *Today* back on Earth."

The woman gave a sigh. "They always recognise me," she said, moving the camera down.

Parker laughed. "We only get the best of the best up here," he told no one in particular. Marcia, for some reason, didn't seem pleased at the recognition. In fact, only Quaritch and Parker were smiling. "But you certainly were a surprise."

Now all the eyes snapped to Nicole. She felt their judgment, but the boss then moved off, heading to a round table in the middle of the room. He seemed to dim the impact of the insult as he said, "You've proven your worth though, as according to Quaritch within two days you've infiltrated the enemies' camp. That's impressive."

"How did you know?" she asked not unkindly, to which Quaritch laughed, "Word gets around quick here." The look he gave her

suggested he knew what indeed had happened with Wainfleet, but he didn't say a word.

"Look, I don't care how you did it, all I need to know is that you can stay there for three months," Parker said. *Three months, huh?* She glanced at the colonel, who gave a lopsided grin; so now she supposed the details of her mission were about to come out. Looking back, he had been extremely vague.

"I can, sir," she said.

"Good, because – hey, someone get this thing started, huh?" Marcia moved around the long desk, touching some buttons. Before them, a huge hologram image of the Omaticayan Hometree appeared. Even with technology, and downsized, Nicole found herself still amazed by the vastness of it. Compared to the other trees around it, it was like a large trout around minnows. "Good. Now, their damn village is sitting right over the richest unobtanium deposit for a hundred klicks in any direction. Which sucks – for them – because they need to relocate."

She paused, taking that in slowly. "Does Doctor Augustine know about this?"

"Yeah, she does, and she's on the next ship back to Earth if she tries to cock-block me on this."

Oh no. That rocked Nicole to her very core. People called her a fool often, or commented on her intelligence. But there were different degrees of intelligence. Not everyone could be academics, the world would fall to pieces. She was perceptive towards those around her, and she'd seen her mentor with the Na'vi. *Going back to Earth would shatter her.*

"Look, I'm going to level with you, sweetheart," he continued. She looked at him coldly at the moniker. "We've tried everything. We gave them medicine, uh, clothes, roads, but no – no, no, no, they like mud. And smearing themselves with shit to disguise from predators. I don't even know. But we need to find a way to get them to move.

Because, as Marcia will no doubt tell you, the one thing shareholders hate more than bad press, is a bad quarterly statement, and we're reaching the end of our tether here."

"So what do you want me to do, exactly?"

"Get 'em out of there," Quaritch told her simply. "We need that site – they needa go."

She slowly nodded, the enormity of this task slowly dawning upon her. Well, she had an in – it seemed doable. And the prospect of walking was the real selling point for her. "I'll do my best, sir."

• • •

"What did Atilla want?" Grace had retreated back into her brusque manner as quickly as blinds shutting down on a window. Being with the Na'vi was like taking a drug – she felt high when she was with them, and crashed when she wasn't. Cigarettes helped, so she kept one between her lips as Nicole pumped her wheelchair through the door.

"Just wanted to talk about our past hells." She wheeled herself over to one of the link chambers, pulling herself in.

Sure. Grace sighed, looking down at her student as she pulled over the upper clamshell. "Be good today, all right? And don't piss Ja'kanhe off, please."

"He seemed pretty easy-going," she huffed. She looked pointedly at Grace. "A lot like you, actually, right now."

Mm, I know. She massaged her temples, quickly finishing off the link up. "I'll be fine in a little while. Tired, is all. Settle in, marine. Norm – fire mine up, would you?"

"Yeah, yeah!" He'd said it softly, but not soft enough that she didn't hear the scorn dripping off his words.

She shook her head, closing the hood of Nicole's link before going to settle in herself. The warm gel lining in the unit enfolded her, and she closed her eyes.

And when she opened them, she found herself looking up at the lines of the hammock, and above that the large curved ceiling that came from one of the larger branches. She touched the top of the hammock, and sat up, pulling her legs over.

" *I see Sleeping Beauty is finally awake* ."

She gave a laugh as she saw N'deh looking down at her, his mesmerising eyes locking onto her own. She was just amazed at how real he was. He wasn't a dream, and she was so lucky he wasn't. For months, Eytukan and Mo'at had kept the Na'vi and humans completely separate – it was only three months before Nicole had come that they had been able to see one another again. It killed her to lose everyone else, but she was glad to catch up with one friend at least. " *I see you like to steal the stories I told you and use them against me,* " she said. He held out a four-fingered hand to her, and she took it, coming to her feet. " *I always saw myself as Cinderella, really.* "

" *Oh?* " And then he caught on to the reason why. She smiled wistfully at him, before turning serious and asking, " *Where is Ja'kanhe?* "

The two of them descended down the spiral staircase, N'deh moving as easily as though he was weightless, and she found herself embarrassed by how much noise she caused running down the stairs. But she felt that if she did this, some of the heaviness would be lifted off of her.

As her bare feet met the cool soil, she felt a sense of homecoming. She had felt it the night before, but now it seemed so much more real. This wasn't a dream. All the scents, sights, sounds… she couldn't imagine them all. Creativity had never been her strong suit.

The smell of breakfast baking; the sight of some of the clan members working on clothing; laughter of children filled her ears. " *Welcome home, Gracie* ," he murmured. Her tail coiled up and down involuntarily, and he smiled at the sight of it.

And now to thank the one who did it, she thought. She looked amongst the clan, but couldn't spy him anywhere. N'deh quietly asked one of the members where they might find him, and they pointed them in the right direction. Walking out of Hometree, they headed towards the large lake that flanked the tree to the east, and as they headed towards the small waterfalls, they found him and Nicole. The pair decided to watch how Ja'kanhe tutored her for a moment.

The prince was moving slowly through the water, barely causing a stir within it. He waded through the shallows, his eyes focused on where his feet were. He let his fingers dangle in the stream, and slowly, with infinite patience, he came closer to whatever he was aiming at. He placed one foot securely in front of the other, taking time to draw his leg out of the water. He continued to move his hand almost in slow motion, and then, in a sure movement, lifted it out of the water and threw his prize onto the bank. Nicole ducked as a large green fish collapsed onto the back, flopping this way and that. He'd moved his fingers under its gill-covers in order to lift it out, with such a soft movement that the animal didn't know until it was too late. Even from a distance, Grace could see the pride glistening in his eyes, and she had to admit some satisfaction from watching that amazing move.

" *He was always excellent at tickling fish out of the water* ," she murmured. N'deh blinked at her.

Nicole looked absolutely astounded as she looked at the choking fish. As it lay still on the bank, Ja'kanhe said something to her – it was her turn now. *This'll be good* , Grace thought slightly haughtily.

" *Remember when you tried this?* " N'deh softly asked.

" *Stop reading my mind!* " she giggled, sounding so much like a teenage girl. She looked at her friend, and said, " *Sorry I hit you in the face. I still maintain it was an accident.* "

" *I know.* "

But then they kept silent as Nicole suspended her legs over the rock, and slipped into the pool. She came to stand beside the future leader, and tried to copy his movements. But from the get go, she was more jerky, and the water churned up with her steps no matter how hard she tried to go slow. The fish were clearly darting away from her, so much so that she gave up and began to chase them within a few minutes, causing even more drama amongst the school. Water flew into the air, a curl of it washing over Ja'kanhe. He had to turn away he was laughing so hard. N'deh was gasping for breath, and Grace was busting a gut herself.

But finally, a fish flew out of the water. Whether Nicole had truly done it, or whether it was in the fish's attempt to get away and it launched itself too much into the air wasn't clear, but in some way, she had succeeded. "All right, get it out of your system!" she said as Ja'kanhe was trying so hard to gain control of his laughter and failing miserably. "And oi, you nasty-ass spies! Get outta there!"

"Uh oh. Busted," Grace snickered, flicking her tail forwards to signal to N'deh to move. They emerged from the thicket of the forest, coming towards the other Na'vi and Avatar duo. Nicole emerged, dripping wet, from the pool, and shook herself off like a dog. Ja'kanhe put his hands up to avoid some of the water, though it was generally pointless.

"We will work on that," he told her as she went to inspect her prize. The fish she had caught was only four inches long, but she looked very proud of herself as she announced, "Hey, anyone can get the big ones – it takes incredible skill to get a small one!"

N'deh glanced at Grace, tilting his head to the one they had come to find, before saying, "Nicole, let me show a trick. It will help with your

fishing."

She looked like she was about to protest, but a meaningful look from the older Na'vi hushed her, and she went dutifully. Grace found herself alone with one of her first students. *You can do this* , she thought to herself.

She didn't need to properly look at him to know that he was doing that to her. She just knew it. He had such a piercing gaze, one could feel it from miles away. When she properly looked at him, she found she was right, but what she was glad for that his face looked calm. So the main worry that he would be angry right up front was dispelled.

" *I see you, Ja'kanhe* ," she murmured, doing the symbol.

He didn't do it back, which sent her heart rate accelerating. *Great. My first day at the clan and I've screwed up.* "I thought your kind would not come again," he told her. "I counted on it." She swallowed, but then a wide smile broke over his face. "I am glad I was wrong."

She let out a trembling breath, and a hesitant smile came upon her face. What she was shocked at was the strong and warm embrace she got from him, which she amply returned. "I see you, Mother," he told her, and she felt like she could cry. *Mother…* Tears prickled at the back of her eyes and she felt a tickling sensation in her throat which she swallowed. She just wanted to cling to the boy – well, no longer a boy – and just reminisce all day.

"I missed you," she told him, before pulling away, looking at the young man standing before her. *Holy, you're now eighteen years old* , she thought with some shock. She had totally forgotten. He was formally part of the clan.

He shot her a warm smile, showing his incisors. That wonderful smile made her heart pang, thinking of the young boy who would crawl into her lap as she read him a book, or would write on the chalkboard underneath her letters. She wondered if this was how all

parents felt when they saw the baby they used to cradle all grown up and going about their own lives. She knew that she was not a true parent to Ja'kanhe, but he and his brother had always treated her as one. She pushed the thought out of her mind, not wanting to ruin the happy moment.

"I grow strong in the time you were gone," he chortled, his tail flicking in his happiness. "Father made me second-in-command."

"So I can see." She had to stand on tip-toes to touch the top of his head, ruffling his new hair. He gave a melodic laugh and bent down so she could do so properly. "You've gotten so damn tall! How dare you be taller than me? You must have grown eight inches since I last saw you."

"Father say I grow like weed."

"He probably got that saying from me. Despite all of us saying you were a Tsan'ten and you weren't allowed to do such a thing, you did it anyway!"

"You should see Tzu'khan." The only sound after that was the rushing waterfall, and the *plop!* of a fish diving back into the depths of the river. Ja'kanhe's smile faded as he regarded her. "One of us must say about him."

Grace folded her hands together, interlocking her fingers. She focused on that, not sure if she could look him in the eye. "How is he?"

"Shattered," he told her straightforwardly. When she brought her face up, looking distressed, he looked back down to the glistening water. "He left the Omaticaya."

"I heard," she whispered, her ears going back. "N'deh told me."

"Mmm." Turning his body to the river, he explained. "After it happened, he did not see us. It was like we not there. He would not

speak. Not hear. Nothing."

"Where did he go?"

"A clan to the north. We have not seen him since the time." He perked up then, and turned to face her, looking excited all of a sudden. His tail curled in circles, showing his joyous nature. "He may return now."

"Why?"

"How do you say… *I think it would provide closure for him.* " That had been how they communicated. If something was easier to say in one language, they switched effortlessly. It worked for both of them as they were both rather fluent in Na'vi and English. Grace blinked, but she was confused by the statement. " *I think, seeing you, might help him. I will contact him* ."

Ja'kanhe, think that through , she thought, but didn't voice it. She didn't want to bring the young prince down, but something told her that Tzu'khan seeing her was not going to help matters. If anything, it would tear open wounds. She might as well grab him, bind him down and dive her hands inside him, showing him his entrails. That could be less painful. Seeing the shining hope in the young man's eyes, she couldn't say what she thought. She just gave him a smile.

Behind her, she heard a gasp and a sudden splash. They both turned to see Nicole pulling herself to the edge of the pool, looking like a drowned cat as she came up. N'deh was trying to teach her how to fish with a fishing arrow, and that had gone worse. " *I will see if he can come tomorrow,* " Ja'kanhe said, before looking at Nicole.

She had taken another arrow from N'deh, and he gestured with his fingers at something in the water. She breathed out slowly, standing very still. She looked absolute statuesque, and Grace wished she had a camera with her. The way Nicole was standing, by N'deh's instructions, made her look like an absolute vision. She was bent down, her arm poised, her legs apart for balance. She looked just

like one of the women from the clan. And the movement she did next confirmed it; the spear-like arrow flashed into the water, and she reeled it in. On the end was a wriggling fish.

N'deh gave a cheer, as did Grace and Ja'kanhe. And Nicole just beamed at them all, looking at her catch with a lot of pride. "Ney-cole very impressive, Mother," the prince told her. "Learns so quickly."

"Well of course, my child – she's a woman."

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By the end of the training session, Nicole had racked up about eight fish, suitable for dinner that night. Once Grace and N'deh had said their goodbyes, they took the catch with them so it could be cleaned.

"It was well done," Ja'kanhe told her as they sat at the pool. "I now do not know what to teach."

She gave him a smirk and a wink. "Because you didn't expect me to catch on so quick?"

"No, I did not," he admitted honestly. He paused for a moment, looking towards the large waterfall. "You still have much to learn. But I prepare to teach you how to fish all day."

She gave a stretch, arching her back. She moved her feet absent-mindedly through the water, before she felt the ground shuddering underneath her. At first she stressed it was an earthquake, but her Na'vi mentor didn't seem concerned, and once she looked behind her, she found the source of the shake. Three direhorses charged up to them, and halted right beside where they sat. She gasped as several flecks of mud hit her face and body. *Great, going to have to have another bath,* she thought, though realised that wasn't exactly a curse – so much water around still did not fail to take her breath away.

And the direhorses did as well. Their long muzzles dipped down towards her, snorting warm breath all over her. They had stopped so close, and she realised they were being ridden. As she gazed upwards, a delicate leg swung over the horse's back, and landed soundlessly onto the muddy ground.

You , was all she could think as she surveyed the female Na'vi – it was the same one who had been giving her death stares the night before!

And she was doing that now. Ja'kanhe stood up, and Nicole did the same. The expression on the female's face was one of disdain as she looked at the Avatar.

"When are you going away?" came the voice, which sounded honeyed.

She arched an eyebrow in response. "Direct. I like that," she said, giving a grin. The frown on the female only increased.

"This is Tsu'tei," Ja'kanhe informed now.

"Huh. Gezundheit. Pleased to meet you."

Tsu'tei's tail ran through the air with sharp, cutting motions. She turned her dark gaze to the prince, and muttered something in their native tongue that needed no translation – from the tone and the furtive glances in Nicole's direction, it didn't take a genius to work out the path these words were taking.

"I wish you luck learning," Tsu'tei suddenly said, turning to English. "You Sky people do not see. Do not feel. How anyone likes you is beyond me."

"I will have you know," said Ja'kanhe, sounding exasperated, "that Ney-cole is liked by our leaders."

"Some like the smell of rotting animals." And with that, she did something that despite her bitchiness, Nicole had to admit was quite amazing: she flipped her long, elegant plait into her hands, and then took the long antennae of the direhorse that extended from where its ears would be. She touched the end of her hair to the antennae, the tendrils from it coming alive, and she leapt onto the back of the horse, and it moved, seemingly without a kick or a tug on a rein, which was non-existent.

She could only stare at the retreating horses in bewilderment, barely paying attention to when Ja'kanhe said, "Let us go for a ride, hmm? You can learn that."

She wasn't sure. After seeing the movement that Tsu'tei had just done, she realised just how much she had to learn. Perhaps that wish of luck had some validity to it.

Chapter Four

Chapter Four

The camera clicked on, and she adjusted it manually. Framing her face, she shook out her bobbed hair, and cleared her throat. "Okay, so, this is video log twelve, the time is 2100." Nicole groaned, and glanced behind her. "Grace, do I have to do this now? If I don't sleep, I'm going to fall off the trees when Ja'kanhe takes me on patrol."

"Do it now," came the cool reply. Her boss brought her eyes up from glancing in a microscope that was on her desk. "It's fresh. You'll remember more."

"I swear to God, at this rate my last words will either be 'Whoops' or 'Shit' as I trip while running due to extreme tiredness."

Grace gave a small smile, gesturing for her to do what she had to. With the recount of the day as her background soundtrack, she looked back into the microscope, paying attention to the small sliver of a fire weed under the lens. As she scrutinised over it, and heard the girl complaining about Tsu'tei which she was about to turn around and correct, before the door to the lab opened. In stepped Marcia, wielding her camera.

"Oh fantastic! We have an actual journalist to help me with this video log!" Nicole exclaimed, turning the focus onto their visitor. "Hey media hack, mind giving me some pointers on exactly what I should say?"

The woman pursed her perfectly lipsticked lips. "Calling me 'hack' is not going to get you very far in tips, girl," she said, and once that was settled, "Just try to be impartial. But really, this isn't a news story – this is like a journal. Your thoughts and opinions are welcomed."

Grace turned the microscope off, and looked to Marcia. "You come here for something?"

"Yeah, actually. Catch." She put her hands out and deftly caught the camera that was tossed in her direction. "Mind taking that out to the field? We need more documentation of what's going on out there. I need some more still images for the Ken Burns effect in the next downlink." When the scientist and the marine exchanged confused expressions with the journalistic lingo, she just said, "Can you please get me more images of the Na'vi? By maybe next week?"

She shrugged. "I can try. Anything in particular?"

"I dunno, shots of tribal life? Show me how happy they are, you know?" Giving a smile and saying a thank you, Marcia left them, heading back outside the labs.

Nicole exchanged strange glances with Grace. "Was it just me, or was that weird?"

"Very weird." *'How happy they are', huh? Wow, I wonder why.* She weighed up the camera in her hands, wondering how to get it over to the Omaticaya clan. She supposed she and N'deh could come to the fence, and one of the Avatar drivers could pass it through the wire. For now, she just put it on the desk in front of her, making a mental note of it. Pushing her office chair over to her student, she came to sit in front of the camera, hearing the voice drop out – she'd obviously run out of things to say. "Here, I'll make this easier for you. What has Ja'kanhe taught you so far?"

"How to fish. How to horse ride. Shooting an arrow. The language. Exploring."

"Ta-da. You got a wealth of memories to store on video. And you know, yes, it's science, but sometimes it's nice to… look back on things."

Nicole regarded her, seeing Grace suddenly lost in her own little world. *I really wonder what you have in your video logs* , was what she was thinking. She glanced back to the camera, and cleared her throat. "All right, well. Ja'kanhe has been teaching me a lot of the language, which is a pain. It's extremely confusing, their grammar and such. He keeps telling me about how everything happens for a reason and that the forest is their world, their life. Really hope this tree hugger crap isn't on the final."

"Hey, now, come on – we could learn a lot from the Na'vi. When was the last time you saw a wild tree on Earth?"

There was a long silence which gave the answer.

"Mmm, just as I suspected," Grace said, wheeling herself back to her desk. Her voice had taken on a sombre tone. "The Na'vi are an incredible race. Not perfect, of course, but they're pretty fucking close. They've got the right ideas. Humans go on and on about how animalistic they are… How they need to be civilised, cultivated. I don't know, they gotta pretty good society already happening. They are extremely intelligent. They are perceptive, they're beautiful, they're…" She trailed off momentarily, looking forward towards the administration area. Her jaw tightened. "And meanwhile, we're the ones who poisoned our own drinking water, destroyed our own habitat, and blame everything but our own selves for a lack of structure in our own society. How ass backward is that?" She just turned back to the microscope then.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" Nicole asked after several moments of complete silence, and she was beckoned over to the other desk. She turned off the video log for the moment and wheeled herself over. "Are all the Na'vi kinda… related? I mean, they all call each other 'Brother' or 'Sister'."

A laugh erupted in response. "No. Just a polite term. Once you're closer with them, you might start calling them that."

"Thank the Lord, because I was getting worried there was some incest stuff going on there."

"No, no. Nothing like that." Grace moved her hand underneath the microscope, swapping a glass slide for another, as she continued, "They do have differing marriage laws though."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. They love very purely. It's rare for a couple to really divorce or anything. Unless it's an arranged marriage and they just don't love one another. Ja'kanhe and Tsu'tei would be a pretty good example."

Nicole must have looked every bit as scandalised as she felt, for when Grace brought her face up from the microscope to change the lens and saw her in the process, she asked, "What?"

"Wait, they're *engaged?* " She gave a spluttered laugh. "Jesus, the poor, hen-pecked bastard."

"Don't be fresh. Tsu'tei is a lovely woman."

"Are we speaking of the same Na'vi?"

The only sound was the *tick, tick, tick* of the revolving zoom lens. "She's just not good with Avatars. Bad experiences, you know. But going back to your original question, no, they most definitely are not related."

Nicole nodded slowly, still flabbergasted by the proposal announcement. *Ja'kanhe you poor, sorry son of a bitch,* was all she could think. But then she recalled something she had wanted to ask before they went off on a tangent. "So then, N'deh and Eytukan aren't really brothers? They do have some similar looks."

"Those two are real siblings, just many years apart. Eytukan was nearing twenty by the time N'deh was born. So N'deh's Ja'kanhe and… He's Ja'kanhe's uncle."

She'd heard the slip-up. "Ja'kanhe and…?"

There was a long hesitation. The microscope was turned off again, and reaching into her pocket, the scientist pulled out a cigarette, lighting it. Nicole thought that meant she was preparing to tell a story, but it was quite the opposite as she stood up. "Don't worry," she said, tapping the marine on the shoulder. "Let's go get some shut eye. We need to be alert for tomorrow."

• • •

The next day was a little cooler than the rest. Clouds moved to cover the usually bright blue sky, like a fluffy blanket that the sun was pulling over its head, not wanting to face the day it had created. It caused a serious atmosphere to hang around, though Ja'kanhe seemed to be the only one truly affected as they walked amongst the forest, his tail dragging in a moist ground.

"Are you all right?" Nicole asked him softly.

He cast his golden eyes to her, and she thought he was going to just say he was fine, but he didn't; the Na'vi didn't lie. They didn't even tell white lies. It was clear to her that he was far from well, but in order not to tell an untruth, he just said nothing at all. He tilted his head for her to continue walking forward. "Your feet are softer now," he said out of the blue. "It is good."

"Thank you," she said, giving him a smile at the compliment. "Just been trying extra hard to be light footed, as you said. Focusing on exactly where I place my feet and what not. Guess it's a mark of a good teacher, eh?"

Ja'kanhe continued to walk soundlessly, not replying to her praise. She couldn't help but feel a little insulted; when she had first complimented him, he had given her a brilliant smile and done the same to her. But now he paid her no mind, lost in his thoughts. And then he suddenly stopped as if he had heard something. His ears swivelled this way and that. She copied his movement, trying to hear

what he had, but there was nothing except the trilling call of birds in the trees, and the slightly nippy air that ran over their skin, bringing out some goose bumps. But he seemed unconcerned as he pulled the feathers around his shoulders more, and then tilted his head back towards the clan. "Follow," he said, and she obeyed, though she was very confused.

"What did you hear?" she asked, now her footfalls becoming heavier – he was moving so fast and she was pushing to keep up, so she wasn't able to carefully plan her movements now. He leapt as nimbly as a deer over a log, and she launched herself over as well, landing better than she thought she would. Her feet had grown more calloused with daily use, following him through the forest, so she no longer had to stop and start so often in order to rest. This made running easier, and though she loved doing it now, she wondered what the rush was.

Ja'kanhe ran out into the field. As she followed, she could see a whole crowd had gathered. *Huh, smells like trouble.* But all she could hear was excited gasps, and yelps of excitement pierced the air. She could see tails moving up and down, which she had learnt was a sign of happiness. "Hey, what's the situation, please? What's going on?"

But all she got of an answer was, "Get Grace." She frowned at the prince, and he looked back calmly, until she dropped her gaze and went to do as he said. She had to push past the slowly maddening crowd, all the Na'vi of the Omaticaya seeming to come out of Hometree. She glanced backwards, seeing past the large muddy field and then the lake beyond. There was the herd of semi-tame *pa'li* within the field *,* she found strange they would get excited over – the herd was always grazing around. But in the mix of the animals, there was one that a rider. She wanted to get closer, but Ja'kanhe had asked a favour of her, and she didn't want to upset him. *Speak of the devil* , she thought as she saw him striding over to the newcomer, but she didn't get another look in as more Na'vi came to

join the mingling crowd, and she knew that if she didn't move, she wouldn't do her task.

As she walked back under the colossal columns of the tree, she found the usually occupied base empty, except for the woman in question. Grace sat alone, beneath the large skeleton of the *toruk.* Nicole smiled to herself, thinking of how good she was getting at these Na'vi names, but it faded when she took in her boss's expression. Maybe Ja'kanhe wasn't the only one who seemed down in the dumps.

"Hey," she said, coming to sit next to the older Avatar. "Ja'kanhe wants you outside."

"Does he?" came the soft reply. Grace sounded nervous, she realised.

Nicole reached out to touch her shoulder, trying to turn her around so they'd be facing one another. In her golden orbs, she saw something she'd never seen in the scientist's eyes – pure, unadulterated fear. But she didn't offer any consoling words; instead, she frowned. "Okay, can someone please tell me what's going on? It's like pulling hen's teeth around here."

Grace shook her head, and rose to her feet. She brushed her 'Stanford' top down, rubbing some of the dust that had collected into the fabric. *It'll be fine,* she thought to herself, giving a defiant nod. *Yeah, it'll be fine. I'll be fine.* She looked over to Nicole, and tilted her head towards the rest of the clan, and the two Avatars walked together, one melting easily amongst the clan, the other sticking out like a sore thumb in her human garments. As they pushed back through the throng, she set her mind at ease. *It's been a year – he'll be fine with you. Just be polite. Think of how Ja'kanhe accepted you so quickly!*

But fear was hitting her so hard, it was a wonder that she didn't collapse into a shaking heap of nerves.

They approached the front of the crowd, where the young prince was laughing with another young male Na'vi. As Nicole looked at them, she felt like she was seeing almost double. This male had the same strong jaw, the same square-shaped face. The only difference was the height, as the newcomer looked two or three inches taller. They had the same laugh, the same smile… everything. She saw movement in the corner of her eye, and saw the two forms of Mo'at and Eytukan, hand in hand, coming to the scene. They joined into the merriment, pulling the newcomer into a hug. It was a side she had never seen of the leaders before. They were always polite, and did smile, but they'd always been so stoic. *Who is this person?* was the question that was swirling constantly around in her mind.

" *I have missed you, little brother,* " Grace heard the man say, pulling Ja'kanhe into a tight bear hug after being released from the bosom of Mo'at. " *You haven't changed a bit!"*

" *You clearly have – your eyesight is going!* " The prince earned a playful swat over the head for that, even though it was more self-mockery on Ja'kanhe's part.

Just be calm, she could only think, standing beside the crowd who were calling out to the man. Some of the children escaped their mother's grip and rushed over, to which he knelt down and gave them hugs. She was glad for the delay.

But then Ja'kanhe's eyes turned to see Nicole, who waved at him, and his eyes alighted after right upon her. *Fuck.* He smiled widely, which Grace hesitatingly returned, and put his four-fingered hand on the man's shoulder. "Brother, someone you must see," he said in English, and turned him around.

Nicole found herself smiling at her Na'vi mentor's smile. She still wasn't certain of the reason behind it though. She had never seen him smile so much. Eytukan and Mo'at followed their son's gaze, and beamed at the Avatars as well. They looked like a beautiful family photo. But, she realised a smile had been plastered onto Grace's face. Her tail was rigid, and when she looked back at the new male,

she noticed that he had stiffened when he saw the Avatar. Behind her, the clan had gone silent. Even the trees seemed to bend to this disquiet, almost appearing to stop their own leaves from rustling in the breeze.

The male's lips pressed together, in what looked like an extremely uncomfortable smile. He shrugged Ja'kanhe off, coming towards the women. Grace cleared her throat, and touched her curled fingers to her forehead before extending them towards the male. " *I see you, Tzu'khan* ," she said politely.

He stood before her only for a moment, drawing back his hand as if to respond to the gesture, but instead it flew outwards, lashing across Grace's face.

Everything happened as if in slow motion. The hit had been hard, and she had been knocked off her feet, hitting the mud with a sickening *slap!*

And then chaos broke out.

"Holy fuck!" Nicole screamed, dropping to her knees and skidding across the mud to the other Avatar. She touched Grace's face, and shook her gently, but she was out cold.

The clan were up in arms, all of them yelling various things. Whether they were egging on this asshole, or against him, it was unclear. But he was being restrained by Eytukan, the leader tugging at this male who struggled so hard that Ja'kanhe had to come and help stop him. Nicole had been in some really shitty situations before, but the look of hot hatred that burned in the male's eyes was something she didn't have much experience with. She'd never had someone look at her with such revulsion, especially someone she had never met. *Wait, Tsu'tei* , she thought, but this was still on another level. He genuinely looked like he wanted to kill her. He gnashed his teeth, screaming something in the language she didn't fully understand. But she was smart enough to poise herself over Grace in a

protective stance, and some animalistic sense within her caused her to snarl right back.

N'deh, where the fuck are you? Nicole thought, and the minute she had it was like she had summoned him. He burst through the crowd, the mud flying up from where he landed hard. He was livid, snarling back at the male, and he came to stand protectively in front of Grace. And she realised, with the way he stood, he was trying to block her out from the danger as well. He yelled something in Na'vi, and Eytukan yelled something back, (*I really need to get a grip on Na'vi,* she thought) before N'deh ran over to take Ja'kanhe's place in restraining the male. Ja'kanhe rushed over to her now, and looked at Grace.

"I have to go to her!" Nicole called to him. He looked confused, obviously because he was thinking that Grace was right there, but then he understood.

"Come on!" he said, and giving a penetrating call that sounded like a bird. Two other Na'vi came to help them pick her up from the muddy floor, and pull her away from the danger. Her body was now covered in mud as they tugged her, but it was better that then her getting even more hurt. The moment they were under the shelter of Hometree, the sound of the uproar dimming, he said, "I will protect. Go."

In the hub of the uproar, with the background noise of yelling, she lay herself on the hard floor and closed her eyes.

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Grace pushed open the top of her link chamber, gasping for breath. She touched her cheek, her mind playing a trick on her and telling her she had been hit in this body. But there was no mark there.

"Grace!" Max ran over to her, holding a pre-lit cigarette, her lab coat and glasses, a wide smile on his face. But as he saw her hard breathing, and when she refused the offerings, he knew something

had happened. And his happy expression dropped. "Jesus Christ, what happened?"

At this point the link beside her flew open, and Nicole pulled herself out, practically jumping into her wheelchair and crossing the space between them quickly. "I'll tell you what the hell happened!" she spat, making a motion with her hand for Max to give them some room. "Some dickhead of a Na'vi just sucker punched her!"

"Oh my God, are you okay?" he asked, putting the stuff aside and trying to get Grace to look at him. She pushed him aside, lying back on the warm gel, holding her head as if she had a migraine.

"I'm fine," she said finally, putting her hands to her face. She then stuck her right hand out, and gave a few clicks with her fingers. "Cigarette?" And it was placed in her hand. She took a long drag, trying to calm down. She licked her lips, feeling how dry her mouth was when she did. "Actually, do we have any whiskey around?"

"Nah-ah," Nicole said, stopping Max before he ran to get it. "Not until you tell me exactly what the fuck just happened."

She frowned at her. *Don't tell me how to fix myself,* was what she wanted to say, but looking at the alarmed expression on the marine's face, she sighed. *She does have a right to know.* She blew out the smoke, keeping it away from the ones looking over her, before replying. "You just met the rest of the royal family. That was Tzu'khan, Ja'kanhe's older brother."

Understanding flashed across Max's face, and he shook his head. Nicole just looked even more bewildered. "What?"

"He left the Omaticaya. He's been gone for the past year." Taking another long drag on her cigarette, she looked very troubled, and it made Nicole feel guilty for asking, at least at this point. Maybe she should have given her a little while to chill out first. But Grace wasn't angry; just pained. "Remember how I told you that five Na'vi were killed? The twenty year old, her name was Akwete. She and

Tzu'khan were meant to be a mated pair. And… well, you can guess the rest." She blew out a puff of smoke, chewing on the side of her mouth.

"After it, Tzu'khan was… It was like he was possessed. He wasn't himself at all. I'll never, ever forget the look on his face when he found out. He loved her, so much. After losing their future queen, and with their son being so fixated on wanting the Avatars dead, Eytukan and Mo'at sent us away, for our safety. For their clan's safety as naturally, they feared the military and, also because they hoped it would bring their son back to them. It didn't. He cursed them out, telling them he never wanted to associate with such blind Na'vi who let the 'infiltrators' in, and left."

Nicole breathed out slowly, taking that in. "Damn," she murmured, resting her arms on the side of the chamber.

Grace slowly sat up again, and asked Max to get an ashtray for her, before she looked towards the administrative building. It was as if she was wishing they could hear what she was saying. Her jaw tightened. "Those pricks destroyed the clan, destroyed that family. And of course, with Tzu'khan leaving, it meant Ja'kanhe was to become the next leader. He had told me time and time again when he was growing up of how glad he was to be the youngster… He didn't want that responsibility. He was terrified of screwing up. Maybe that feeling's gone; he seems to have risen to the challenge now.

"But I think it runs deeper, personally. Because now he's being forced to mate Tsu'tei. It would have worked if Tzu'khan had stepped up and mated her, but he was just too traumatised. I don't blame him."

From the way she was telling the story, she didn't want Tzu'khan to take the blame for this. But Nicole was red hot angry. " 'Don't blame him'?" she exclaimed, her voice echoing throughout the lab. Thankfully most of the other scientists were out at lunch, but with the sheer volume she was speaking at, it was a wonder no one rushed

in. "That male just hit you and you passed out. How can I not blame him? How are you not angry right now?"

"He is going through a tough time."

Nicole could barely believe what she was hearing. She rolled her eyes. *Where is the take-no-shit Grace that I know? She wouldn't have let this go lying down!* "You know, the whole Omaticaya seems to preach of gender equality. Meanwhile we still have men who hit women!"

"Well that's kinda where the equality comes from," Max said. At Nicole's dark glare, he seemed to tread carefully. "One side hits, the other hits back. But, really, the equality is that no one should hit anyone. Lemme guess – the clan was in uproar?" She nodded. "Yeah, because he overstepped the line. They have organised fights if they must. But for someone to hit someone out of spite…"

She looked at Grace, touching her shoulder. The scientist looked at her, and she could see the pain in her eyes. But she didn't want to fight back. That eagerness, that fire in her belly had just dissipated. She didn't snap, or yell, or speak sarcastically right now. When she looked away, putting her cigarette between her lips again, Nicole realised something. *Max has got you all wrong,* she thought, her expression suddenly irresolute. *You don't like plants better than people. You like Na'vi better than people.*

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Intense worry filled the young prince as he sat upstairs. Some of the other members had urged him to talk to his brother, so they took the lifeless forms of Neycole and Grace towards the hammocks for them to rest, away from the immediate danger. The Avatars had not woken for a long time, so he had retired to the royal's quarters up the stairs. It was a small, circular space, carved out of the trunk of the tree. Just a place they would go to discuss matters of the clan. And seeing as she was almost royal, his betrothed decided to accompany him, much to his chagrin. He wasn't paying much attention as Tsu'tei

braided his hair; he didn't even flinch as she pulled too hard at one point. His mind was a thunderstorm of thoughts, and the lightning cracked as the one occupying the majority of them, as well as their father, stormed in.

He put his hand on his future mate's to stop her and he stood up to face his incensed brother. He let his tail hang low and still, so there was no threat, as he began to say, " *Tzu'khan, I'm sorry you're thinking this way, but Grace never did anything –* "

He didn't get to finish as Tzu'khan's hand struck out as quickly as a *lenay'ga* , beating against his face while Tsu'tei cried out in fright.

The burn of the hit was enough to make stars dance in front of his eyes, but he knew from experience when Tzu'khan got mad it was never something that ended suddenly. He'd never seen him this wrathful in all of his eighteen years in this world. And he was certain that he himself never had been in all of his own twenty-three. He blinked, shaking off the pain, before looking at his brother calmly and asking, " *Are you done?* "

'No' was the answer. The hand lashed out again, and struck him on the other side. The sickening sound of flesh hitting flesh rang throughout the area. His brother had hit him so hard that it felt like his cheekbone itself had been bruised.

" *That is quite enough, Tzu'khan!* " Eytukan bellowed from the entrance to the inlet; the accused snarled. His eyes held an inferno that Ja'kanhe knew he had walked into the middle of, and there was no way out as his elder brother bared down on him, his incisors showing.

" *What was going through your head?* " Tzu'khan growled lowly, his tail so stiff it was as if it was paralysed. " *How dare you. How dare you bring her back into our midst. And to think you called me back for a 'surprise' – well this is quite the surprise, little brother!"*

Tsu'tei rushed over, her soft hands seeking Ja'kanhe's shoulder as she tried to turn him around to inspect the injury; but he shrugged her off. " *Tsu'tei, leave us,* " he muttered, his voice low and tight. She looked anxiously between the two brothers, until he shot her a look and she quickly moved off.

" *Yes, make her leave because you know full well I will beat you to the ground for this…* "

" *Tzu'khan!* "

" *No, I would really like to hear what your thought process behind this was. Really!* " Tzu'khan's chest was heaving with hard breaths, the whites of his eyes showing in his fury. The way his hands curled up, looking like gnarled branches of a tree, made him wonder if he should prepare himself for another hit.

But there was no need, as their father came to stand between the two of them, trying to diffuse the tension with his presence. *Father, you should know that never works* , Ja'kanhe thought bitterly as he rubbed his cheek. He was going to have a dark mark on his skin tomorrow.

" *Both of you, stop this,* " Eytukan said thickly.

" *I stop? What did I do?* " Ja'kanhe protested.

" *You brought her back here! After everything!* " Tzu'khan exploded. He turned around, massaging his temples with his fingers as if he felt a migraine coming on. But it was just so he could gather his thoughts, as he came back to counter with, " *What were you thinking bringing the new Avatar here? You are such a moron… You knew that would bring Grace back here!"*

" *You speak as if that was a crime. A personal affront against you."*

Tzu'khan gave a contemptuous snort. His eyeridges creased downwards, and his fingers now properly clenched together.

Oh Eywa , he thought, looking at his brother as if he had been replaced with a *palulukan.* He realised he didn't recognise the face that beared so much resemblance to him. The family likeness ended with their personalities; he'd always known that. But never in his wildest dreams did he imagine something like this." *That's exactly what you think, isn't it? That I did this against you for some personal gain? Tzu'khan, I ask you – what would I have gained from this? To see my brother who just took off when the clan needed him most?* "

He was glad to see he had struck a nerve. His voice had raised several beats louder as he finished the last sentence. Tzu'khan appeared to have stopped breathing for a moment, but when he gained air back, he opened his mouth, undoubtedly to deliver a painful and scathing remark. But Eytukan quickly stepped in again.

" *Both of you, stop it right this instant! Tzu'khan, Ja'kanhe didn't bring Grace back, I did.* "

Now the anger was turned onto his father; Tzu'khan looked at the leader as if he wasn't sure what to believe. " *You?* " he asked dangerously.

Eytukan was the voice of calm amongst the two warring siblings, but the prince could see that his father did not want to be part of this. He wanted this ended now. " *Yes, me!* " And then, just for the finishing touch, he dropped his voice low. " *Are you wanting to hit me, then?* "

The father's challenge was open, but the son knew his place, and looked down at the ground. The leader gave a soft growl of approval. " *As I suspected. It's been less than a day and you've already stirred up trouble around here.* " Ja'kanhe didn't know if Tzu'khan had quite heard what their father had said. He was too busy glaring at the floor, with a look on his face that he wasn't accustomed to seeing. But he heard the next part as if in a completely silent room, someone had screamed it: " *I suggest you apologise to your brother, and when she wakes, apologise to Grace, too.* "

" *Apologise?* " he cried out incredulously.

" *Yes!* " Eytukan snarled back. " *I don't need this hassle. The Omaticaya are a clan – we work together. I don't know what you've been doing for the past year, but this attitude ends. Now. I will not have you belittle our guests. Understand?* "

Tzu'khan's ears flew back, but he muttered something, and Ja'kanhe thought he heard a 'Sorry'. He breathed out slowly, and was about to excuse himself to check on the Avatars, but his father turned around and left first. Giving a final look to his brother, he followed his father into the corridor, seeing Tsu'tei and his mother talking in hushed tones. They both abruptly stopped when they came in, and Mo'at asked, " *What happened?"*

Eytukan gave a sharp flick of his tail, coming to kiss her on the forehead briskly. " *Our sons are tearing one another apart. As they have been for their entire lives.* " He didn't elaborate, saying this as he walked past, and Mo'at shot a worried look to Ja'kanhe before following him.

He closed his eyes after his parent's departure, figuring he ought to go and see how Grace was doing, before he felt fingers enclose on his own. He turned to see Tsu'tei looking at him with a hard look. He groaned, taking his hand from hers. " *Please don't start. I don't need it from you, too* ." He knew perfectly well that she wanted to push it in his face – 'I told you so'. He really did not want to hear it.

But she decided to give it to him. " *You never should have brought Neycole here.* "

" *I beg you then, what was I supposed to do? Let her become a feast for nantangs?* " She made no reply, but just continued to look pointedly at him. " *Tsu'tei…* "

" *She is a demon in a false body! You saw how the clan looked at her when you brought her in. Do you honestly think that not one member doesn't share your brother's view on this?* "

" *Everyone is entitled to their own opinion. And we don't call one another out on it.* " Giving her a stern look, he turned to follow his parents, his mind a complete mess. Was this how life had been after the incident? He couldn't remember Tzu'khan ever being such a way, even in his darkest times. When he'd left the clan, it was as if they had lost the use of a leg, the group collectively limping as they missed their prince. But now that he had returned, perhaps they'd found they could walk without his aid.

Instead of following his parents down to the ground, he turned around to head towards a small room. An instinct told him to go that way. The room was filled with various woven baskets and some clay pots, the smell of ointment and herbs hitting his nostrils. With the darkened sky, a torch had been propped against the wall, casting a soft blue glow within. His instincts had been right. In the compact area was a hammock, where three figures were clustered around. Grace was sitting on the hammock, her five-fingered hand holding a cool compress of leaves to her cheek; N'deh was checking her over for other injuries they might have missed; and his own student was pacing worriedly.

"Everyone all right?" he asked as he stepped in, relieved that Grace was sitting up.

At the sound of his voice, Neycole's flew up, and she looked at him. A multitude of expressions flashed over her face in an incredibly short space of time – anger, relief, concern. But she settled on the latter as she came over to him. "What the hell just happened?" she asked. "I hope that brother of yours is going to apologise!"

"Nicole, don't," Grace warned, taking the leaves off her cheek. They had left a green tinge on her cyan skin, but Ja'kanhe knew that some of the pain would be gone.

The younger Avatar groaned. "I don't think I feel safe, you going out there alone!"

"I will watch her, Nicole," N'deh promised.

"You weren't this morning. And this happened!"

"He was at a hunt, Nicole," Grace informed. "He can't watch me 24/7. Hell I can't even be here 24/7."

A demon in a false body , Tsu'tei's words echoed in Ja'kanhe's head. He breathed out, looking at his second-mother. She wasn't mad, just upset. She was chewing on her lip in a way that made him feel so guilty. She was no demon; she was the nicest alien he'd ever met. He shouldn't have summoned his brother back; he knew that now, but it was too late. There was nothing to be done. What a fool he had been! He should have known better than to bring her into the line of firing arrows. But he knew the whole fault wasn't entirely resting on his shoulders. *Oh Tzu'khan and Tsu'tei, if only your memories weren't warped – you'd remember you both used to call her mother, too.*

" *I'm so sorry, Mother* ," he murmured to her. He crossed over to the room, and N'deh moved away from Grace so he could take his place on the hammock. He gave her a reassuring hug. " *Don't worry. Things will get better. He just needs time to adjust.* "

She breathed out slowly, nodded. " *Yes, he does* ."

Neycole looked as if she could hardly believe the scene unfolding before her. She threw her hands up, her tail involuntarily flicking angrily. "Okay, I don't know what was just said, but it sounds like you two are letting this slide!"

He looked calmly at his student, before patting Grace on the shoulder as he stood up. He flicked his tail to the right, but when Neycole didn't move, he said the motion verbally: "Follow."

She did, and he led her out of the small room. His aim was to head down the stairs, but he stopped off at the other inlet he had brought her to first. He went to the woven basket that held clothes, and opened the top. Reaching into its depths, he procured a leather strap, and brought it with him. She watched him, puzzled, but he

didn't explain. Instead, he walked downstairs silently, and when they got to the bottom, he saw most of the clan had left the area. The drama had dissipated; no one was hanging around in a large assembly any longer. There were a few still hovering around, going about various tasks such as sewing or teaching the children or carving, and it was to one doing the latter that he called. He murmured something in their language, and the woman blinked, before reaching behind her to a stack of bows. She passed one to him, which he thanked her for.

The sky was still broodingly dark. *What perfect weather for a time like this* , he thought, before remembering what he had been taught with Grace. There was a literary term for when the weather was a perfect reflection of one's mood, but for the life of him he couldn't remember. That was what happened when she had been away for a year – they tended to forget.

But Neycole was not forgetting what had just happened. Her soft footfalls which he had praised her on now sounded extremely heavy as she sloughed through the mud. "You all right?" he asked her, stopping to look at her. She walked right past him.

"What kind of stupid-ass question is that?" she asked, rounding on him as they reached the treeline. He remained calm as she growled. "My friend just got punched by someone who will probably do it again and no one is reacting at all!"

"He will not do again," Ja'kanhe promised.

She gave a scoff, folding her arms across her chest. She still wore the stomach band around them, which he still found strange, but he didn't question her. Some things were better left unsaid. But that was a saying lost on her as she said, "How can you be so calm about this?"

He watched her for a long moment, not saying a word. When she looked like she was getting extremely frustrated at not getting an answer, he said, "Grace told me your people like drama."

She arched an eyebrow. "What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

"We do not." She went quiet, listening now. "When a situation happens, it is ended, swiftly. Like… when you are drinking water. Do you dig at riverbed? Cause dirt to run through water? No. You would not drink dirty water. You wait for it to settle. You would not claw at riverbed again. Why make it take longer for something you need?"

She was utterly silent. Her ears went back as she contemplated what he said. He felt pleased, thinking the anecdote had helped her understanding. Finally, she said: "I hate the fact that you're eighteen years old, and you're so wise. Damn, when I was your age I was getting hammered nightly."

He gave her a small smile, finding her statement peculiar. "But you are my age."

"Well… yeah," she eventually conceded, giving a strange movement with her shoulders – they rose up, and then down. Grace did that sometimes when she didn't know; he was confused on why she would use that now.

He tactfully decided to change the subject. Just like the story, he didn't need to dig at the riverbed – it was best to let the water settle of its own accord. "Come," he said, flicking his tail forward. He led her back through the forest, having to walk slower for fear of slipping on the slick mud. The sound of a thunderclap overhead masked most of their steps, though he knew as they were not hunting, it wouldn't matter.

They carefully moved over trees that were growing unrestricted; their trunks were gnarled and twisted in various shapes and degrees. For now, they had a brown bark in the daylight, but in the evening, they would burst forth in various scale-like patterns of colour. But he knew they wouldn't be out there long enough to see it; they would return to the clan before dinner.

They eased themselves over a low-hanging trunk, and he jumped down soundlessly to the forest floor. Neycole was not as elegant, jumping, but not being prepared for the slimy ground; she gave a gasp as one leg went one way, and another threatened to go another way, but he gave her his hand to help pull herself up before she injured herself.

"Thanks," she said, grimacing as she massaged her legs. "That would have hurt like a bitch."

He blinked once, before unshouldering the extra bow he had brought. His was still around his muscular chest, the string holding it fast. Compared to his, this bow was incredibly plain; as a training bow, no one decorated it. The only embellishments upon it weren't on purpose – perhaps someone put it down in a bad place, or were not gentle, for the malleable wood had several gashes. The woman hadn't been able to mend it before he asked for it. But it would still serve its purpose well. He passed it to his student, along with an arrow from his own sling.

She took it in her careful, five-fingered hand. *What does one do with an extra finger?* he wondered. *How do they manage? Are they not clumsier?*

But she seemed to be rather accurate as he asked her to stand like how he had taught – legs shoulder width apart, back straight, dominant hand on the string. He appraised her stance, making some minor adjustments here and there – elbow down, back straighter, so on and so forth. She multiple little errors, as was common for those doing it the first few times.

He checked her stance, and then moved around behind her, trying to estimate where exactly the arrow could land. He didn't want her firing it out and have it hit something. Or worse, someone. She had a good eye, but he didn't want to risk it yet, so he got her to drop the stance, and straighten up. Then, when he said so, she had to immediately spring into the same position, no mistakes. They did this repetitively, until he was satisfied she had the idea.

"When can I actually fire this thing?" she asked.

It was a fair question. "When I say you are ready," he told her. When she looked like she was frowning, he just said, "Do it again."

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Nicole found herself feeling a little lighter once it was nearing dinner time, and he finally got her to stop testing her stance and head back. She had to admit, he was a smart motherfucker. Though constantly bringing her arm up and down, practicing the stance, got tedious, he'd done what he had set out to do – calm her down. And it wasn't like she was going to get fired up again, as they didn't pass by Tzu'khan or Tsu'tei on their way back. As the sun began to set, and the plants began to slowly shimmer their splendid shades, the incident of the morning was almost forgotten.

But to her surprise, when they returned to Hometree, and her stomach began to growl at the smell of roasting hexapede (" *Yerik,* " she reminded herself), he didn't go towards the fire. Instead, he walked upstairs, and by the way his tail flicked, she knew that was the signal for her to follow him up. They leapt across the open staircase, and she thought they were going to the first level, but no – he kept going. She blinked, and pushed herself on. But as they kept going, her breathing began to get laboured, and every time she looked up, she got disheartened by their progress; he seemed intent on going all the way to the top. By the time they finally reached it, her arms and legs were screaming in protest, her breathing heavy. Her fingers were covered in splinters as she had almost stooped to crawl, she was so tired by the end of it. He, on the other hand, had barely broken a sweat. *Damn you to hell* , she thought, envious. Even with her military background, she had been out of proper training ever since she had lost the proper use of her legs, and it was obvious.

She looked out at where they were. With the sky turning to a shade of light purple-pink, she could see Polyphemus more clearly, some stars coming out to play. They were so high up, she could see for so

many kilometres in every direction. The dwarfed forest trees looked like a choppy green-black sea, with sparkles of green, purple and pink here and there. She could see the five waterfalls that fell to the north, even from here the water looking iridescent. The sudden exercise was now no longer the thing that took her breath away. As she looked at where they were, they were standing on a thick, moss-covered branch of Hometree. Above them she could see millions of green leaves. It seemed that this tree was the only one almost unaffected by the bioluminescence around it.

He gave a warbling call that impressed her. *How does he make that sound?* she wondered, and without thinking, she tried to replicate it. She sounded like a dying cat. She clasped her hands over her mouth, but he'd heard, and he looked back at her with an expression that read 'What was that?' She gave an embarrassed smile; he gave a quick laugh, but her smile changed to an expression of alarm as the green leaves shifted quickly, and then surged forward towards them in a rush of wind. As they came towards her, she put her hands up, but not before she saw the cause.

A large green and yellow banshee, with a flaming red crest, burst out. "Holy shit!" she exclaimed, remembering her terrible encounter with them the first time.

"They are not dangerous. But do not look in his eye," Ja'kanhe warned, and she quickly put her eyes down to its chest. She realised then that that was a bad place to look, as he was standing with his back facing her, so she focused instead on the wings. And they were a sight to behold. Part of it was membrane, while the edges looked transparent like a fly's. They stretched out easily fifteen metres in wingspan. And as she looked at its two breathing holes in its chest, she noticed there was a leather item on its back – a saddle. She felt a little calmer with knowing this thing was tame.

In fact, it looked at her with curiosity. It gave a squawk, quieter than the ones when they attacked, but still shrill – hence the name 'banshee', no doubt.

"This is an *ikran* ," he taught her, and she repeated the word. He blinked at her, satisfied. "Once *tsaheylu* is made, an *ikran* will fly with only one hunter, in entire life." As if to prove a point, he flipped his queue over his shoulder, and bonded with the creature; the animal gave a shudder, and then seemed to level out.

"Huh," she nodded, looking at the creature slowly. It studied her, and gave a soft coo. "Seems friendly."

"Because I told him you were," Ja'kanhe said. Nicole blinked spastically. *You did what now?* He didn't answer, and instead came close to the *ikran,* swinging his leg over effortlessly. "You will have an *ikran,* too."

She tilted her head, wondering what that would be like. This one did seem nice, and she found herself smiling. "When?"

"When I say," he answered, with a little crinkle of his nose that made her wondering if he was teasing her.

All of a sudden, he gave a piercing call, and the *ikran* screeched, making her cover her ears. But she kept her eyes open – and she was very glad she did – for she saw them take off, the wings spreading out straight as they took to the skies. She looked over the edge as they flew, circling around Hometree. She couldn't help but grin as she saw the incredible sight of the *ikran* and the rider. And when they came closer, she noticed that Ja'kanhe was smiling, too. *You and your brother are nothing alike* , was all she could think, and she found herself thanking some deity that this was the case.

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"I thought you would like this." Nicole looked at the wooden bowl that was proffered to her. Due to the flight, Ja'kanhe and she had missed dinner, but he had gone to a member – they always saved something for the members who had been absent. And though he never said it, she knew that he had purposely made them miss dinner so that they avoided more unsavoury Na'vi. Admittedly, she

began to feel guilty. *You haven't seen your brother in a year and I'm making you avoid him.* But when she felt that, she realised how strange it was. She had never really felt guilty about anything in her life. 'Live hard with no regrets' was always her motto. The only aspect she'd ever thought over constantly was her sister, and what she could have done better. And maybe that's why she felt bad. *Your brother is alive and you're not even looking at him right now because of me and Grace.*

She never expected to feel bad for an alien.

"Thank you," she replied half-heartedly. She was grateful, but there were too many confusing thoughts swirling in her brain, so much so that she wasn't even aware where her feet were taking her. They carried their dinner up the stairs, back towards where Grace and N'deh were. She had a dark purple mark across her cheekbone, which made Nicole want to turn around and seek Tzu'khan out and beat the ever living shit out of him, but she stifled it, remembering the lesson she had been taught that day.

Grace felt herself in much higher spirits as she held the small camera in her oversized hands. "All right, let's get a photo here so Marcia can get off my ass." Usually, she hated photos, but she was enjoying documenting this moment. When that year had gone by, they were all she had had. What she had said to Nicole about the video logs was steeped in truth – sometimes they were nice just for memories, and photos were one of the best forms of that.

As she flicked through the camera, she looked up as the prince and her student – his, now – came in. She smiled at them, and Nicole looked absolutely relieved she was fine. "I'm much better, kiddo," she promised. Though it would be a few days before the bruise itself was gone, physically the pain had disappeared. Emotionally, it was as if she had been stabbed in the heart, though she did her best not to show it.

Nicole wasn't believing it; she knew it was an act. But she didn't want to 'stir up the riverbed'. So, she kept mum. But beside her,

Ja'kanhe's eyes had drifted to the item in Grace's hands. He gave a bright smile, his tail flicking up and down. "A camera!" he said, looking very pleased with himself for remembering the English term.

Grace herself was rather impressed, and she commended him on it. "You haven't seen one of these in years," she said, "So that's quite incredible you remember it."

"You take pictures of us in front of the school," he reminded her.

"Like, four years ago!" A wistful smile came across her face as she looked at him. *Four years…* She really wished she had more photos of him growing up. He and his brother. She would have loved to compare the differences, as being around them all the time, it was hard to tell how they changed. But the years had slipped through her fingers way too fast, and now he was a man – his growth had slowed, stopped even. The Na'vi matured much faster than humans.

Ja'kanhe came over, holding out his hand to take the camera from her. He looked it over, being careful. "Would you like another photo, then?" Grace asked; he beamed at her. He had always been intrigued with human technology, and seeing the photo of himself – well, she was quite certain that had been one of the clearest ways he had seen himself. Looking into water was one way, but it wasn't the way that would give the most defined vision of what someone looked like.

"Nicole, get in on this."

"In your dreams, doc," Nicole said with a shake of her head. She avoided photos like she did the plague – they were not her thing. But with a stern look from Grace, she sighed as Ja'kanhe handed the camera back and came to stand beside her. With all the dark thoughts swirling in her mind, she could barely remember to smile until she was told to.

And when they switched positions so Nicole could take a photo of her boss and N'deh, she quickly looked at the playback to see the

image she had had to have: there the two of them were, standing close. With the soft blue glow of the torch, it cast an almost cinematic filter over it, making it look like something out of a magazine. Ja'kanhe was peering over her shoulder, bending down slightly to fit into the frame, and she was standing looking cool and confident, hands behind her back, legs apart in an almost military pose, both smiling. And as she looked at it, she had to give a genuine smile. This photo actually wasn't that bad. She would have to give it to Marcia, but she now wanted her own copy before giving it up.

Chapter Five

Sorry for the delayed chapter everyone – been dealing with issues outside of writing. Now I'm assuming a lot of things with Na'vi reproduction and such, because from my research we still don't entirely know how it happens, (or maybe I just completely fail at research) so I've taken quite a lot of potential artistic liberty here. I still hope you enjoy it.

Chapter Five

Thwack!

The arrow flew away from the bow with extraordinary speed. It hit the makeshift target of a sack of grain, right in the black marking. Some seeds flew from the fabric, like blood from the animal she would eventually be hunting. Giving a sly smile at her success, she looked at the training bow, her fingers curled around it as if she had been born with it in her hands. What had originally been frowned upon as an antediluvian weapon was proving its worth. "You know," she said, turning around to her tutor, "These actually are kinda useful."

Ja'kanhe watched her carefully. His face didn't betray many emotions, but his eyes looked like that held a discreet merriment. "You shoot well," he approved after several moments of staring at her in such a way.

"Technically, it's not my first time," she reminded him as she surveyed the bow. She positioned it in front of her again, aiming it back at the sack of grain. "I was a pretty good marksman in my day, buddy." But she was smart enough to catch herself before she mentioned it was with a gun – she didn't want to bring back potentially repressed memories for him.

And for that, he seemed grateful as he blinked once at her. "Not even half a moon with us," he commented, coming over to take the

target away once she had dropped her bow again. He moved through the long blades of grass so soundlessly it was as if his feet were not touching the ground. *I still can't do that* , she thought wistfully, watching his moving figure. "And you do so well."

"Better than you?" she asked teasingly.

He turned to her, giving her a sceptical glance – his eyeridges arched, and his lip turned down at the corner. *I am so better than you* , she thought to herself haughtily, the grin on her face the only insight to her thoughts. And he knew what she was thinking. He took his bow off his shoulders fluidly, as if he hadn't even had to twist his arm to remove it over his head. Still watching her with his golden eyes, he didn't focus on the target, and sent an arrow flying through the air without even looking. There was a satisfying *pop!* that caused his ears to flick up – he had hit the target. Nicole's eyes widened as she saw several grains spilling out and mingling with the grass. He didn't have a mirror in front of him, or any way of viewing where the arrow was going. He had done what he set out to achieve – he had rendered her speechless.

A smile came to the prince's face, and he gestured for her to try. Nicole just shook her head, in absolute bewilderment. She didn't even roll her eyes as she might have attempted with a member of the military who showed off – to her, that was some serious skill right there, and she doubted many trained personnel could do the same.

"I ask you to try, Neycole," Ja'kanhe suggested, his eyes alight with the thought of some competition.

Fuck that. "I'm good – you win!" she laughed nervously, making a mental note of never to piss Ja'kanhe off. Never once had he been cruel. Never once had he belittled her during their training. But she had a feeling that for someone who was generally so happy and good hearted, that one had to run as fast as a *palulukan* if he turned angry.

And as she watched him, going to take the arrows off the target, she realised she would see that one day. Her time was going quicker than she had realised. Who knew three months was so short? Inexplicably, her mind became a reel of sudden thoughts as she watched him, and she felt her heart hardening. The anger, the hatred, she had felt towards his brother and the attitude some the Na'vi had shown them had gone. Spending time with Ja'kanhe reminded her that not everyone thought the same way. All those dark thoughts had disappeared. She glanced down, looking at her cyan skin, digging her toes into the cool soil, feeling the dirt get under her nails. *I don't know what it is. I just feel so… right here. I've never felt grass properly. Never truly felt a cool breeze. Never breathed so easily. What's happening to me?*

"Why not we go for a ride?"

His voice brought her back to reality. "What?" she asked, seeing him coming back towards her, his tail flicking up and down. His eyes went to hers, and she followed, seeing her own was almost still – absorbed in her own thoughts. "Right, yeah – we can do that. Lead the way?"

But he didn't move. He slowly slanted his head, his eyes narrowing a touch. "You all right?"

"Me? Yeah!" She gave him a grin to make the lie more believable, though she had no need – once she said 'Yes', he blinked once, and led the way out of the field.

"How about we run there?" he asked.

"You're on!"

Shouldering her bow at the same time he did, being careful not to snap the string, they took off. She could run faster, and further every day. A shiver ran through her at the excitement, the pure pleasure, of running. Running. She still could hardly believe it. Her heart was beating fast and it wasn't due to the physical exercise, but for the

simple act of doing it. For years she hadn't. Practically everyone could do it without thinking – if someone had said to run, they'd listen. But for her, it had been a different story for years.

The two fell into step with one another, Ja'kanhe's silent impressions on the forest floor a stark contrast to her louder, heavier footfalls. She was getting much better, but the moss was still occasionally churned up, bits of soil flying here and there. The warm air whipped across her face, sending her long black hair streaming behind her. She followed her mentor as he leapt up from the solid ground to a long tree log, which began in an upward climb to come to rest several metres above the ground. Before long, the wooden path diverged two ways, and she smirked as she took the left while he took the right. She knew that they would be running alongside one another for a while, so it would be a good way to test her speed against his.

"Wanna race?" she called out, hoping her words weren't pulled away with the whistle of the wind.

He continued to run, his stretched, soundless strides beginning to pick up the pace. From the slight smile upon his face, it looked like he had accepted her challenge. And so she pushed on, making her legs move faster. They began to protest against the sudden change in pace, and she found herself having to do many things at once – run faster than him, keep an eye on exactly where she was placing her feet, and keeping her breathing even. So focused was she on the task that her eyes were flitting here and there to be sure she landed correctly, or moved right, that soon enough she had moved a metre farther than him.

But he was slowing down for a different reason, and she realised – too late – that she had forgotten the bend in the trees that were coming. "Neycole, slow down!" Ja'kanhe called, which she tried to do, but the momentum of her fast moving body made it hard to grind to a halt. She dug her feet into the moss on the log, but her torso was still heading forwards. She yelped as she reached the curve that

turned so abruptly it was like a hook turn, and felt one foot going over.

She was right – her last word was going to be "Shit!" as she felt that horrible sensation of falling.

Her body was suddenly rammed sideways, and she found herself falling in another direction. Ja'kanhe had leapt from his log to push her out of the way, and the two fell, almost weightlessly, in what seemed like an infinity. She glanced down, seeing the grassy ground with dark roots. *This is going to hurt* .

But down to sheer luck, the twisted green roots had turned out to be vines, which caught them, easing the force from the fall. She felt Ja'kanhe cling to her, and they hit the ground, but she was only winded – he'd moved them around he hit the grassy ground instead of her. Gasping and coughing, only her hip bone throbbing from the angle at which she had fallen, she quickly looked at him. He groaned, sitting up, coughing himself. She placed a hand on his shoulder, making sure he was all right. He placed his hand on top of her own to assure her. The only damage to both of them seemed to be being winded.

The two looked at each other, and then at the height from which they had tumbled. The vines that had seized them had been enough to prevent any broken bones or other serious injuries. But it could have been far worse for him. He had been the one to break her fall. She just looked at him, her mouth agape but no words coming; she didn't know what to say. *You just saved me* , was all she could think. Licking her lips, she guiltily said, "Thank you", for she knew she wouldn't have had to if she hadn't suggested the race.

He just looked at her; there wasn't a trace of anger on his face. Or disappointment. As they sat in the cool meadow, the sound of birds chirping and their own harsh breathing, he didn't look as if he was about to punish her for it. He just blinked once. "You are welcome," he told her. They continued to look at one another, the thoughts of

their wild ride running through their heads. There was a beat. And then they exploded into laughter simultaneously.

"Let us agree," he chortled, leaning back into the grass to look up at the trees above them, "Never do that again."

"Agreed!" she nervously laughed. She sat up, rubbing her bare hip and grimacing as the pain came afresh. "You know this forest inside out though. Why did you agree to the race?"

"Because I am intelligent – I slow down. You did not."

She gave an embarrassed laugh. Her cheeks felt hot and not from the exhaustion. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, just trying to still her racing heart. "Well, thank you, Ja'kanhe. You saved me."

"Ja'kanhe."

He had repeated his own name. Confused, she looked at him, her ears flicking. "Huh?"

There was a brief hesitation, and he glanced away, as if wondering how to voice the thoughts in his mind. "You say my name 'Jack-an-ey', but it is 'Ja-khan-hey'."

Her eyes widened. *I thought I had been pronouncing it right all along!* Now a new type of embarrassment flooded into her. "Shit, sorry," she said.

She felt a pressure on her cheek, and realised he had put his index finger to her face. He carried the slightest of smiles. "Your cheeks – they purple. You're blushing." Of course, the fact that her body was doing involuntary acts such as that and having them pointed out caused her to blush harder, and he laughed to see it.

Once he settled, she looked at him with a slight frown due to his teasing and mumbled darkly, "You pronounce my name wrong too, you know."

The smile was wiped off his face; she hadn't said it soft enough for him to not hear it. His ears flicked up, and then down, and she felt so guilty for saying that. "I am sorry," he said in turn. "How should it be said?"

She put her hands into the grass, her ears going back as she realised she had turned the moment from a gentle teaching to something harsher. Usually she would have just ridden it out, but his sincere expression made her feel sick as sin. Desperate to take it back, she looked at him, smiled and informed, " 'Ner-cole', not 'Ney-cole'."

"Oh." He blinked once slowly, understanding. He looked upwards again for a second, before looking to her again, "You can give me nickname. If my name too hard."

"Really? You'd be cool with that?" she asked.

"Yes, I would be fine."

She looked into his golden eyes, a frown crossing her face once more. She wasn't a big fan of nicknames, but perhaps it would be easier for them. At least this way, their errors wouldn't happen. "All right, but only if you give me one. Deal?" Without thinking, she stuck her hand out in the human gesture to agree on something. He looked strangely at the extended appendage, and she gave a laugh, realising, and told him to forget about it. "Do we have a deal?"

"Yes."

"All right," she said, now feeling better about shortening his name. She looked at him, twisting her head this way and that as she thought of an appropriate name to give him. *Something easy for me, so it would probably be a human name… Something that is a little similar to his own. That'll make it more comfortable for both of us.* And as she looked over the lean frame of the blue prince, watching him as he sat, his knees pulled up towards him, his tail running through the grass, she thought of one.

"Jake."

His ears perked up, and he pursed his lips, as if trying to accustom himself to the new sound. " 'Jake?' " he repeated, and she nodded. "All right. I am 'Jake'."

Feeling a little relieved, she leant back on her palms, crossing her long legs one over the other. "All right, pal, your turn. It's only fair." She put an arm up to the sky, looking rather philosophical as she stretched her five-fingered hand out. "Bestow upon me my new name!"

He regarded her with a gentle glance, resting his chin on his knees. He looked her up and down, but didn't say anything for so long that she wondered if he had forgotten his task.

"Well?" she asked.

The corners of his mouth pulled up. "Neytiri," he whispered delicately, but it was clear enough that she had heard due to the superior hearing in this body.

The name was melodic, attractive. It sounded like the name of a character from a film and not a real life name. But then again, most of the Na'vi names she had heard made her think this. The way the word rolled off his tongue made her wonder if she would be able to say it correctly. A nickname was supposed to be easier, not harder! Not to mention shorter, and this one certainly wasn't. " 'Nee-terri'?" she attempted, saying it slowly in case she was wrong.

" 'Ney-tee-rii'," he sounded it for her. He still spoke mellifluously, and his expression mirrored the way he said it; in his eyes held a kind, sensitive look. She felt a strange quiver through her insides. It was like her stomach was doing a flip when he watched her in such a way. She didn't know what it was, but the look he often had upon his face made her wonder if he could see into her very soul.

She gave him a smile of understanding, and as the words, "Okey-doke, Neytiri it is for me", came out of her mouth, she was immediately regretful. He had given her such a beautiful name. She loved it, even though it hadn't been born to her. It just felt so right, so perfect. Yet she didn't think her personality did it justice.

• • •

She woke up with a sharp pain in her abdomen, making her curl up in her bed. *Ugh, fuck – right now, really?* Nicole grimaced, feeling the simultaneous panging and burning sensation a little below her navel. One of the reasons she sometimes hated being a woman.

Hoping she hadn't stained the bed, she pulled herself off the hard canvas into her wheelchair. Keeping quiet as everyone around her was still sound asleep, she wheeled herself over to her bag, looking through the welcoming pack RDA had given them. The small bag contained a toothbrush, toothpaste, razor, shampoo, conditioner, a comb, shaving cream, but… "Are you shitting me right now?" she growled under her breath.

She hadn't said it softly enough, for there was a stirring near her on one of the other beds. Shaking her head, she quietly left the room, wondering where she could go. She didn't feel wet – she just felt the cramps. But she knew that the more unpleasant part would be coming quite quickly. Going through the sparse halls, she could see it was still dark out as she went past a large window. She checked the time – 4:00 am. The Avatar drivers had a different timezone to the other workers on RDA, and it was that hope that pushed her towards the labs. Maybe some of the women would be awake.

There was a woman there, but she didn't think that Grace would be able to help her in this matter. Nevertheless, she went through the glass doors, causing the scientist to take off her glasses and look up from her work at the sound. "You're burning the midnight oil, aren't you?" Nicole asked her, eliciting a smile in response. "Have you slept at all?"

"Yep. Came back at 10, woke at 3."

"That's 5 hours. That's not healthy. Aren't you always on my back about taking care of this body?"

"Aww, she remembers my teachings," she cooed, and the two gave a laugh. Grace stretched backwards over the office chair, before cracking her neck and looking back to her work. She typed something quickly on a tablet that was placed on the white table, and asking, "You're up early yourself."

She hesitated. The sharp pain that made her wince reminded her of her task. "Speaking of taking care of this body," she began, causing her past-mentor to look up again. She gave an embarrassed twitch of a smile. "Do you have any sanitary items?"

Grace groaned, and she immediately felt bad for asking, before she realised the agitation was not at her. "Those pricks. They didn't give you newbies anything? Jesus. But no matter, I do have some. Give me a moment." She took off her glasses again and got up from her chair, walking around to another desk. She pulled open a few drawers, looking for it, before tossing a small cardboard box to Nicole. "You can use the lab bathroom – no one's there."

"Thanks, doc," she said gratefully before leaving to do just that.

Grace continued to look through the drawers, finding some painkillers as well. She had just moved over to the tap, pouring water into it, when she re-emerged. "Feeling better?" she asked as she popped out two of the capsules and handed them down to her.

"Bless you," Nicole murmured, taking them.

"I told Parker easily three years ago he needed to start giving those out to the girls, but no – apparently they 'aren't important'." Giving a shake of her head and causing her red hair to fly everywhere, she sighed, taking a hair-tie from her pocket and putting it between her teeth. As she moved her hair back, she mentioned in a muffled

voice, "Keep an eye on your Avatar as well for it. Usually tends to come within a couple of days to a week after the human body."

"Goddammit, really? They have it, too?"

"Really sucks when you're an Avatar driver. Mother Nature decides to give you a double whammy every month." Finishing her ponytail, she gestured for them to walk back to her microscope. Sitting back down at her table with Nicole beside her, "But at least you know it means everything is working properly."

"Forgive me if I'm rude, but you keep those in there because…?" She looked at the young woman expectantly. "Well, I'm assuming you don't…? Do you?"

"That's where it gets tricky," she explained, understanding the question now. "No, I don't get it here any longer, thank God. But my Avatar still does – she's in her twenties."

Nicole gave a snort of laughter, and hoped it wasn't rude. She smiled apologetically. "Sucks that you have to live through it again."

"I know, right?" Grace chuckled, readjusting her spectacles before moving some new material under the lens. "It sucks the first few times when you're in the forest. By the way, while I think of it, if you're ever stuck, just ask Ja'kanhe for help."

The expression she got in return was one of utmost shock and horror. She might as well have sprouted wings and flown away. "Whoa, no. No, no, no. You gotta be joking! I'm not asking a man!"

"It's different in the Na'vi culture. Men know everything that a woman goes through – it's not some social taboo, it's just life. They don't find it disturbing or something that is swept under the rug. In fact he'd probably be equipped to help you if needed."

She still looked so scandalised. Grace couldn't blame her; it was a huge culture shock. Most elements of the Na'vi life were, but for a

woman driver, this was one of the biggest. She could still recall when she had been caught out in the forest with them and N'deh had been the one to come to her aid. There was no shuddering, no outward displays of disgust; it was simply what happened and he didn't make her feel embarrassed about it. A soft smile came to her lips as she thought of how grateful she had been, and since he figured out she felt self-conscious, he'd taken her for a horse ride. The two of them laughed and joked together, and when Eytukan had come to ask if she was going with the women to go swimming, his brother had casually mentioned what happened and the leader understood immediately, going to the healer to get something for her pain. From then on, she'd never felt uneasy about it.

N'deh, I do owe you so much , she thought to herself, feeling a warming sensation in her heart, but it abruptly ended when she heard Nicole say, "No thanks. That'd be so awkward! It's like…" She had to pause to think of an appropriate metaphor. "Well I don't know but that's just something you do not do. You don't talk to men about this kind of thing. It feels so weird!"

"You'll get used to it, I promise you. But look," Grace said, looking properly at her, "If you *really* feel uncomfortable, go ask Tsu'tei."

That had gotten the response she had wanted; Nicole's face flew through multiple facial expressions from worry to disbelief to alarm. Satisfied, the scientist smiled and looked back to her microscope, but not before hearing the girl say, "On second thought, maybe asking Jake is a good idea." She looked up questioningly, but she didn't get to ask about the strange name as she had already wheeled herself away.

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The days had warmed up since Tzu'khan had returned. That one chilly day had been an unusual occurrence. Still, the icy feeling wed with apprehension inside Tsu'tei as she turned a corner of Hometree, and found Ja'kanhe sitting inside the inlet. By the light of the glowing lamp, he was mending a training bow, at which she arched an

eyeridge. " *Did you get a relegation?* " she asked, the impact to be teasing though her voice remained serious. Her voice caused the prince to look up. She folded her arms behind her as she stood in the entrance, watching him. " *Now that your brother is home, what does that mean for you?* "

Ire flashed in his eyes, but he seemed to hold his tongue as he slowly blinked at her; she stepped into the alcove, coming to sit a little bit away from him. She crossed her legs, folding her tail neatly around her, and watched him. He focused on the bow once more, and she was tempted to speak once more, before he said, " *It's not mine. Belongs to my student.* "

Oh , was all she could think. Her teeth clamped together involuntarily. *Neycole…* She couldn't believe her future parents-in-law when they announced she would be staying. And Grace. But she knew for all the power he possessed, Eytukan Tsan'ten was soft in the heart. Despite the fact of everything she had caused – everything she had destroyed – his brother loved her with every fibre of his being, and he would have been distraught to lose her again. So what else could he have done? And Mo'at had spoken to Eywa and been assured it was the right thing to do. *If I was tsahík, I would have redone that prayer; I'm sure Eywa does not want them here. She must have misheard.*

" *Now am I right to assume you haven't come for small talk?* " Ja'kanhe asked, making her focus on him again. His tail flicked sharply; she frowned to see it. " *Did you come to see if your position as future tsahík is still assured?* "

" *Watch your tail,* " she warned him. He promptly stilled it, but his jaw was clenched in a way that obviously ran in the family. Tzu'khan did it when he was angry. So did their father.

He lay the plain wooden bow in his lap. He leaned back on his strong arms, frowning at her still. " *What are you here for?* "

So rude , was her initial thought. *But children always are.* She dispelled the thought before it registered in her expression. Blinking, she smoothed out her face, and cleared her throat. " *How is he?* " she asked.

" *Fine* ." She looked imploringly at him; he sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. The frustration seemed to dissipate from him, as she knew it would. For all the audacity he often carried around her, and often around others, she saw right through it as if she were looking through clear water. He did it so no one saw the cracks inside. So no one in the clan saw how worried, how stressed, he was. And usually he did a fine task of it. Yet if someone would offer to speak to him, they would get a wave of a response as he unburdened it all. She was the best one for it.

" *Father's furious at him* ," he finally admitted, biting his lip. " *You know, I always figured if he came back, I would return to being just a hunter and I was fine with that. I accepted it.* " He breathed out slowly, his sun-kissed eyes meeting hers now. " *I did not even think of the fact that father may not give it to him.* "

" *To be fair,* " she chimed in, " *None of us knew the Avatars would be here.* "

His ears flickered; he'd caught the derision that came with the foreign word. It was habit for her now. And usually his habit would be to warn her of how she spoke about them, his second 'family'. But right now, he looked so drained, and he didn't even attempt. " *It was all my fault, Tsu'tei… I honestly did not see that happening.* "

" *Well what did you see?* "

" *I don't even know . I guess I had this vision in my head. I saw him coming home, seeing Grace. Perhaps all those memories of us growing up with her, learning from her would come flooding back.* " He glanced away from her, back to the ground. He didn't appear to be concentrating on anything in particular; his eyes were very far away. In the silence between his words, she could hear the call of

birds in the early morning, though as she watched him, she had a feeling those tunes were more of gunfire. Of screams. And she was very close to the truth. " *I honestly thought that if they spoke, he'd find some closure. Anything. I suppose I was very wrong.* "

" *Let me try and understand this. You thought bringing back the woman who stood there as Akwete was shot in the head, right in front of you and her betrothed, was a good idea? As her life's blood splattered over you both. As your brother screamed and you saw others fall down. The woman who just stood there. Who did nothing. Who – "*

" *Stop it, Tsu'tei* ," he suddenly snarled. So quickly he stood up that the bow bounced off of him and nearly hit her; she had to duck to the side to avoid it. His tail was rigid, and he bared his teeth at her. " *How dare you. How dare you reminisce about that like some sick poetry. How could you even – you weren't even there! What right do you have to that memory? To tell me about it and make me live it again? Every part of this story was told to you by other parties. What nerve you have to throw that back in my face* ."

She promptly got to her feet, her arms pushing her off the ground quickly as she disentangled her legs and tail from one another. He rolled his eyes at her not as fluid movement. She gave him a cold look. " *I was raised as a tsahík, not a warrior.* "

" *If your parents had been any good, they would have raised you as both.* "

The words had tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop them. Her face crumpled so fast it was as if he had taken a piece of parchment and crushed it between his palms. Her mouth hung open as the shock of his words hit her. She felt heavy. She took a slow step backwards, not even knowing if the man she was looking at was the one she knew. That anger that had flared within him… *Grace, you destroyed him. You destroyed him!*

He looked regretful after he said it – or perhaps it was due to the fact he saw her face. He softened, his eyeridges curling inwards in worry. " *Tsu'tei, I –* "

" *Who are you?* "

He swallowed. " *Tsu'tei – "*

" *You want to talk about making each other live through bad memories? Fine* ," she cut in, feeling tears spring to her eyes. She moved backwards as he reached out to her, obviously wanting to place a hand on her shoulder in comfort. He sighed and tried to grasp her hand to pull her back, but she shook it off so viciously it was like a predator had tried to grip her. She just shook her head at him. "You want bad memories," she murmured darkly in English, making his ears go back, "just wait. I will show all when we mate."

It was all he could do but watch her as she left, her eyes burning the threat into him, and not even giving him a chance to retort that he had been told that was physically impossible. Only good memories were shared. But he had learnt a long time ago that she had ways of surprising him.

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At 5:00 am, the lab was abuzz as Grace called orders out like a sergeant on a drill, getting the Avatar drivers linked up. Nicole was still away doing God-only-knows what, so she marched over to see Norm preparing to get into his Avatar for a bit. She noticed the cheerful expression he had on, a drastic change to the past couple of weeks. "You're surprisingly happy," she said as he settled into the warm gel. She began to tap on the screen beside the link chamber, looking at him for an explanation.

He just smiled as he lowered the clamshell. She arched an eyebrow, waiting for a response, and he just shrugged. "Just slept well," was all he said as he closed the link.

She huffed, reaching into her pocket to get out a cigarette. As she lit it, she checked the time. 5:05 am. It was not like Nicole to be late, especially since she started at the Omaticaya. She had her period under control so that surely wasn't the issue. "Has anyone seen Corporal Moakley?" Grace asked over the whirr of machines and voices, but she didn't get a very positive response. She decided to give it ten minutes and then go and search for her. For now, she enjoyed the small time out she got, as her lack of sleep was starting to catch up with her. Feeling her eyelids getting heavy, she sat down, and just watched the Avatar crew go about their various tasks as she enjoyed her smoke.

Nicole was wheeling herself over towards the administrative area. The quietness of the area made the sound of her wheels against the steel louder than usual. She knew it was early, but she also knew that Quaritch was usually awake around this time, and she hoped to find him. *If I cut through the administrative area, I can slip through to the weapons locker. He'll probably be there.*

But as she reached the door and swiped her card on the keypad, she heard voices. She recognised the accents as belonging to the one in question, Parker, and someone else. *Found you,* she thought as she opened the door, but as she slipped in, she stopped as she heard, "Look this is a bad idea!" Her eyes widened, and she carefully moved herself away from the door. She moved forward over the ramp that led up towards the holographic map table, and saw who was talking. There was Quaritch on the side, Parker leaning over the table, and the other man she had been introduced to. The other supposed Avatar driver, Hegner. She'd never seen him drive his though. And he was sitting there, tugging at his long sleeved shirt and looking grim.

She realised she had walked in on a huge argument. Quaritch had his hands clenched; he looked as if one touch would set him off. And Parker was now storming around the table to face Hegner. Thinking quickly, she ducked away, an instinctive feeling telling her they didn't want her to hear this. But now that she was hidden away, she

couldn't see them, so she had to pay extra close attention to what was being said.

"Listen," Parker said in a low tone that made her feel uneasy. She frowned and cocked her head to the side, trying to pick up every word. "The Avatar program is already on shaky ground without these fuck-ups. If it were up to me, Nicole Moakley – " She was really interested now she heard her name – " – and that bitch of an Augustine would be on the next ship home. You can't just physically abuse someone and expect to get away with it. I see a lawsuit happening pretty damn quickly. Now Quaritch has lost one of his best men for a month as he heals."

They're talking about Wainfleet , she realised, swallowing. But to her surprise, the colonel jumped to her defense.

"We need those women a hell of a lot more than I need that one man, Selfridge. They've gotten us right back into the native's camp. Trust me, they're far more important than him right now."

"But – "

"You want to do your job and go home? You start by thinking rationally. What's your saying? 'The only thing shareholders hate more than bad press is a bad quarterly statement?'" Parker seemed to go silent, considering this. "So we wait for Nicole to send 'em out. Why do you think I agreed to send her out there? She'll keep Augustine in check. Those two are like bosom buddies now."

"Please, think of how great it would be if the Na'vi trusted us again. All of us," said a voice she wasn't familiar with, so she assumed it was Hegner. From the soft, downtrodden tone, she could be almost certain of it if it matched his persona. He sounded like he was begging. "It was the troopers running around, blasting everything in sight that caused the rift in the first place." She frowned, wondering what he meant. *In the first place?* "You send them out again, we're back at square one."

She felt as if the world had fallen away from her feet. She swallowed, sordid thoughts and fears swirling in her head. But she continued to listen, trying to piece together this puzzle. She gripped the armrests of her chair, trying to steady her breathing.

"Look, we tried our thing with the natives and it went tits up!" Parker countered. "We gave them a gun so they could hunt more effectively and they gave it back. How smart was that?"

"Because the Na'vi consider it unfair and obscene to hunt with a gun… It's a dishonour to the spirit of the animal and its purpose for existence," Hegner countered. *That's what Jake told me* , she thought.

She heard Parker give a derisive laugh. "Jesus, I'm getting lessons in a culture that failed on Earth long ago. If these natives are so damn impressive, how come we don't have any tribes back on our planet, huh?"

"Please, listen. The Na'vi see our guns as destructive. An easy and disrespectful kill. Wasn't this the type of argument America was having in the 21st century? Where did this gun culture ever get us?"

"Stop the conservative movement, please."

"All I'm saying is, they believe everything has a purpose." A soft smile came upon her face involuntarily as she heard him speak. He sounded like Grace when she spoke of the Na'vi – how a parent would speak of their beloved child, or how a lover would speak of their significant other. But it was always hard to explain the feelings of love to someone outside of it.

"So what's your point?" Parker demanded, obviously wanting him to wrap this debate up.

"I'm saying that this is what makes the Na'vi strong, fast and perfect. They know what they want. They don't want to change."

No, they don't, the thought came to her, *and they certainly wouldn't want to change to us.*

"If that's true," Parker said slowly, "then this is pointless." Her smile was wiped off her face. "If they don't want to change, you're basically saying they won't move."

"No, they won't – "

"So they're useless to us."

It was as if the axe had come down. Nicole felt her heart thumping as if she had been running. Hegner had just locked himself in his own argument. She hadn't seen that coming. How did that get turned around so fast? But the final blow was delivered between Quaritch and Parker – Hegner now no longer had a say.

"How long did you give Nicole?" Parker asked.

"Three months."

"Make it less."

"What's the point? The bulldozers won't even be here. I know you want this done but the best we can do is ride it out. She's got nine weeks. That's gives us more than enough time to chalk everything up, too. You'll keep your shareholders happy."

"Parker, Quaritch, please listen. We can get the Na'vi to cooperate – " Hegner began but he was cut off with a sharp, "Shut up" from Parker.

"Fine," he now said to the colonel. "Nine weeks it is. But she's not going to change their minds. At the end of the day it's going to be the same outcome. I never should have agreed with you about sending a woman to do a man's job."

She suppressed the urge to scream. She could hardly believe what she was hearing. First there was anger at Parker for what he said

about her gender, but then the more important things came to mind. She could hear the blood rushing through her head as the realisation hit her hard. *You're all going to die* , she thought. *All of you. They're going to kill you all and get billions in return. They don't care if you're rotting in the ground as long as they are the ones on top.*

And all she could think of was Jake. Of his smile, his laugh, his gentle teaching. The way his eyes lit up every time she did something right. How his tail curled in circles when he watched her with those sun-kissed eyes. How his hand touched hers to make sure she was fine. Now she saw him lying on the floor, tail limp, eyes white, his hand cold in her own as he was surrounded in a pool of shrapnel and his own blood. She blinked and saw N'deh dead, Grace sobbing inconsolably over her friend, screaming, crying at him to get up! She blinked again and saw Mo'at gone. And then Eytukan. Tsu'tei. Even Tzu'khan. Random members she had met over the course of her time. Families, children crying for their parents…

She began to hyperventilate. She'd never had a panic attack before but she had a feeling this was one. She bit down on her knuckle, drawing blood as she tried to keep her breathing in check; they'd discover her. Her distress began to mix in with rage. Damn them! Damn Quaritch, damn Parker, damn the whole fucking RDA. Damn them all to hell and piss and shit! They were going to murder people and not even care. The Na'vi were people. They weren't things one could destroy and not give a second thought of. They were people, for fuck's sakes!

Calm down and get out of here. Now. She could hear footsteps on the cold metal as the two men began to move, and she began to freak out even more as she figured they would see her, but listening closely she found they were moving off towards Parker's office. Swallowing, she glanced up, and saw Hegner staring right at her.

The look they shared conveyed everything she needed to know. He bit his lip and looked down at the floor, pulling at his sleeves again. Nothing was said between them. She just wheeled herself quickly away from the area, feeling tears springing to her eyes. She fought

them off, trying to get herself under control. *Pull yourself together and think rationally!*

But she didn't even know what was rational anymore. She didn't know who she was. She didn't know what her goals were any longer. She thought she was in heaven and discovered she was really in hell. *The name Hell's Gate really rings true here* …

"There you are! I was getting worried." She looked up, bewildered. She hadn't even realised she had gotten to the lab. *I hope I look okay* , she realised, trying to straighten herself up and put on a smile.

But Grace saw right through it. Frowning, the scientist came over, looking at her. "You all right?" she asked.

No, I most certainly am not all right. I just found out I'm basically the reason a massive genocide is about to happen world over. She wasn't a fool. Despite people thinking she wasn't intelligent, she knew. She knew what was going to happen. They'd take the Omaticaya down and then source other areas. Others would die. This wasn't limited to where they were, it was all over. She knew this because she knew the human condition: no one was ever satisfied.

And how she wished she could tell Grace this. She found herself actually wanting a hug right now. Someone to talk to. Someone to help her figure this all out. But she was on her own, because she knew the minute she told Grace, the scientist would drop her fast. She'd known loneliness. She'd known what it felt like to feel as if the world was on her shoulders. Or so she thought she knew. Now this was literal. And all she could do was nod and say, "Just pain. I'm fine. Let's go."

Chapter Six

Chapter Six

Of all the areas in Hometree, Mo'at and Eytukan's area was the hottest. And for that, she was all but glad. The heat had always suited her best. She could remember, as a young girl, playing often in the hot springs, laughing with the other children as they ran from pool to pool, feeling the rush of the comparable cool air to the boiling water. Despite her love for the warmth, Eytukan could never abide intense heat, so when they were done he pulled away from her, trying to cool down. She could only laugh at him, her tail flicking absently.

" *You would think after so many years, you could take my heat* ," she teased, which caused the eyes she loved to look at her deeply as he replied, " *The Tsan'tens always loved the cold.* "

" *Then you certainly are leading the wrong clan! You should have led the Autuové in Ayáuä Teì. Or, even better, the Virakatové in Virätxáyo.* "

" *And where would that have left us, my spirit path?* " He gave her a soft kiss, but when she responded more headily, he groaned and pulled away. " *You just want me to overheat and collapse, I think.* " So he pulled away, stretching and sitting on the edge of the hammock, letting the lighter air surround him. She stretched out on the fern netting, feeling the ache of what they had done still between her legs. She hoped it would produce a child. She wasn't too old. It had been eighteen years since Ja'kanhe, yet she'd had him very young – they could always have another. The daughter she had always craved. She'd had the name picked out ever since she had been a child, and she was sure the day would come when she would be able to place it upon her own.

As usual, he got changed, but she just lay there bare, not wanting to face the rest of the day. She would have been quite content to relax, listening to the chirp of the birds, the sound of the clan down below going about their duties, as she snuggled with her love. But she knew there was close to no chance of such a wish coming true, especially as Eytukan said, " *I don't know what to say to him.* " The sun in his eyes had become masked by a cloud, his voice thick with doubt.

The clouds extended over to her. The spell that had been over them disappeared. That was how it always had been. They enjoyed their time together, the two of them escaping to a world of their own, only to come back to the proper one once it was done. " *I don't either,* " she replied.

" *I should have refused him. I should have forced him to stay.* "

" *No.* " Her word was cutting, and it made him turn back to look at her. She sat up properly, pulling her knees up to herself and making the hammock sway with her movement. " *What would that have achieved? More arguments? More anger? Resentment?* "

" *Now that's not fair. I never said the word resentment –* "

" *Not to his face.* " Eytukan's shoulders slumped and he breathed out slowly, turning away from her again. She swung her legs over the side of their bed, coming to press her side against his. He was clearly feeling cooler, for he didn't object, nor did he pull his tail away when she entwined hers around it. " *My life, Eywa brought him back to us. Is that not what we prayed for?* "

He gave a snort of laughter. " *We didn't think to add into that prayer that he would be the same person.* " While he'd meant it as a joke, Mo'at didn't laugh. When he realised she didn't, he sighed, and kissed her forehead. " *I'm sure She has a great plan for him. But I wish you knew more of it.* "

" *She has told me nothing more.* "

" *Ask Her?* "

She gave him an irritated glance. " *And this is why I am tsahík and you are olo'eyktan. This isn't some casual dinner conversation.* "

" *Sorry, sorry,* " he said, curling his tail more around hers. It was a trick he had always done to calm her down, and it had always worked. She leant her head on his shoulder, glad he hadn't finished dressing completely so the leader's feather garment wasn't upon them. As regal as it made him look, she had always hated them; they caused her to itch whenever she hugged him. A smile came across her features as she thought of when they had donned the clothing for the first time, several seasons after their mateship. He had been so glad to take her parent's place that he had worn the feathers even to bed for a quarter of a moon, until she got so frustrated she threatened to exile him to another hammock until he took them off. He was smart enough now to sleep bare with her at night. After all, at the time they became leaders, he hadn't been more than twenty, and she seventeen.

" *What are you smiling about?* " he asked, one of his own spreading across his lips. She knew that whenever she was smiling, he often copied her. Such was their relationship.

" *Just memories,* " she replied as her mind travelled once more. She had a brief flash of Tzu'khan, when he was still small and just learning to crawl, clambering all over her mate and her brother-in-law as he tried to get his footing. But he had been an unsteady child for a while, as they had discovered his right leg wasn't as muscular as his left, due to some affectation during her pregnancy. So, she had kept him very close, spending every day practising his walking with him, until his right leg toughened and he could run as fast and far as any other child. But even after he was practically fit to venture on his own, he'd always kept close to her. Her baby boy. It was a memory that made her heart bleed. To ward off the sadness, she quipped, " *Maybe we ought to put him back in my womb and cook him until he's civilised again.* "

" *Really? You'd be willing to do that?* "

She laughed. " *If only. He's twenty-three now…* "

" *And acts like he's missing the twenty.* " He was contemplative for a moment, before he enveloped her in a hug, clearly feeling like he needed some warmth now. Pushing the thoughts of the hardships of their children out of their minds, they both leaned in for a kiss at the same time, but abruptly pulled away as they heard footsteps, loud and unexpected. She was just in time to slip behind her mate, hiding her nakedness. It was a good thing, too, for it was N'deh who came through. While exposed skin was common in the clan, it was something else between certain family members, and in-laws ranked among those.

Eytukan's younger brother looked infinitely embarrassed, clearly figuring out what he had walked in on. " *I'm so sorry. I can, uh – ,* " he said, cocking his head to the side to denote him leaving, but Eytukan replied, " *It's fine. What's on your mind?"*

Apart from the fact we need a more private area? Mo'at thought, but naturally, something else was on N'deh's mind, and she had figured it out the moment he had come through. " *How is Grace?* " she asked him.

" *Better, much better, thank you* ," he said with a thankful smile which she returned, before saying, " *Your youngest is looking for you.* "

" *For what?* " her mate asked.

" *Something about his student, I think.* "

" *Naturally. It's all he ever talks of,* " Mo'at teased, nudging her mate to move but knowing he would not do so with his brother still in the room, to save her dignity.

" *Actually, he asked for you, sweet sister.* "

" *Me?* " she echoed in shock. She had instantly assumed N'deh had come for Eytukan.

" *Sounds like you better go and talk to him,* " her mate told her, to which N'deh replied, " *I will leave.* " He didn't say where to find Ja'kanhe, but she already knew. Once he had gone, she quickly dressed, and her mate gave her some crushed leaves to rub over herself to mask the scent of him. Giving him a parting kiss, she headed downstairs, greeting the various members who called out to her. After she shared their greetings, she spied her son sitting beneath a skeleton.

The bleached bones of a *toruk* . They had found their resting place under the roots of Hometree. There had been many legends of *toruk makto* – the rider of the Last Shadow. Six times it had happened, and it always brought death and destruction in one form or another. They only had one of the creature, she knew, as according to her father, his grandfather– the rider of the great beast – had only been chosen by the male of the pair. In her rage and distress, the female *toruk* had sent herself spiralling from a cliff to the forest below, yet they had never found the body. From that day on, the male was said to be troubled after his betrayal, but stayed with his Na'vi companion for many seasonal cycles after. Once her blood died, the creature left the world too. The story had never ceased to bring shivers to her. *How dreadful to be betrayed by the one you love so much, for someone who isn't even of your kind* , she had always thought. She had voiced this thought to her mother when she was a young girl, and her mother had laughed and waved her off saying, " *What little you know of love. Love fades. It tends to fade for men first.* " And when she had asked why, her mother sniffed. " *Why do we have a Great Mother and not a Great Father? Because She loves eternally. If He existed, He would bring nothing but sorrow.* "

" *Ja'kanhe, don't sit directly under him* ," she admonished in the present. " *Or do you want it to shower on your nuptials? I don't think Tsu'tei will thank you too much for that.* "

" *Mother* ," he said, standing up and touching his fingers to his forehead, which she copied, before he smiled. " *Such an old myth. I doubt that would happen.* " She opened her arms for a hug, which he came into, before he pulled away with a frown on his face. He sniffed her delicately. She knew that he knew that wasn't her usual smell. " *Where have you – oh Eywa, Mother, ew!* " He looked so much like a young boy again as he wrinkled his nose and pulled away. She looked sheepish as he realised. " *You and Father, that's going to give me nightmares.* "

" *It's only natural, my boy. You ought to be grateful, else you wouldn't be here to talk to me right now.* "

" *Yes, but as your boy, I hardly like to think of how I came into existence* ," he grimaced, looking thoroughly disturbed.

She huffed, touching his arm with her own to get him to move so they could walk together. They headed out towards the morning light from the large arcs of the tree's roots. " *Changing the subject,* " she said, bemused by his reaction, though she could hardly blame him – he was right, no child liked to think of their parents that way. " *Your uncle told me you wanted to see me. What's on your mind?* "

He looked like he was about to add something to the previous conversation, his eyes narrowing shrewdly, but he obviously thought better of it as he said, " *Do you mind consulting for some auspicious days coming soon?* "

" *You'll need to be more specific – auspicious days for what?* " she asked, but then a smile lit up her face as she realised. An auspicious day… *You will be getting a daughter* , a voice in her head told her. He was going to make Tsu'tei his mate! The idea of him getting a mate brought tears of joy to her eyes. She felt a most wonderful nervousness that tingled all the way from her knees into her chest. She was brimming with excitement, until he said:

" *For my student to become one of the People.* "

The anticipation was killed like water being thrown over a flame. She blinked slowly at him – not due to the sun in her eyes, but absolute disbelief. Perhaps coupled with some devastation. " *I'm sorry, I don't think I understand what you just said.* "

And she could tell he wasn't joking. This wasn't like when he had been a boy and would tell her that the *pa'li* had run off, only for her to get to the field, find them completely at ease, only to find him laughing and saying, " *Fooled you!* " There was no trace of jesting in his eyes. Swallowing, she put on a sweet voice, trying to reason with him. " *Ja'kanhe, she has only been here – why, not even a moon! It takes two years to train for that.* "

" *I know* ," he said, putting his hands up as he smiled. " *But – look, think about it. Technically, she's been training longer than a moon, right? She was a warrior of her own kind, she told you and Father that herself. And she's picked up so much, so fast. And if you really think about it, she's been training for even longer than me, Mother. Longer than I've been myself, honestly. And –* "

She put her hand up to stop the flurry of words that had come from him. He had obviously been thinking about this a long time, but she had only just gotten the message, and that was a lot of information to receive in just a few heartbeats. Once he stopped his dialogue, she began hers. " *And I must ask, how about her language skills? Hmm? How is she in that aspect?* "

" *Actually, remarkably decent.* "

" *Culture?* "

" *She knows the story of the Last Shadow* ."

" *Look, obviously you've gathered your arguments and have one for every single counter I will put* ," she told him with a sigh. " *But it's just… My son, I will never deny you are a good teacher, but be reasonable: she's been here for such a short time. Grace has been here so much longer. Do you see her taking this on? No. And of your*

argument that she's been doing this longer – all right, I will consent to that. "

" *So then – "*

" *But she has not been herself for a long time.* " She let the words sink into his mind. " *My boy, she's still so young in that sense. She hasn't been… in this body for a long time. If this was Grace, and she had been the one who learnt so quickly, then I would say go ahead. Eywa knows N'deh would be over the moon. But I want you to seriously consider the impact this could have… This could be too much for her.* "

She knew he was disappointed, but this wasn't a place where children went against their parents wishes. They could ask, but no meant no. This wasn't a world where children could yell and scream at their parents until they got their way. And that was why Tzu'khan wasn't settling back in, and why Ja'kanhe accepted with a blink and a, " *You're right, Mother, I should have known.* "

She found herself feeling disenchanted that she had had to deny him. She touched his arm in a comforting gesture.

" *I best go and find her,* " he said as she looked over his shoulder, and tilted her chin as she said, " *You needn't go too far. There she is.* "

He followed her gaze, and she couldn't help but look at the young Avatar girl as she stood in the shadowy arch. With the light reflecting behind her, she looked like a gorgeous silhouette. But it was tainted, as she looked as uncomfortable as a land dweller who had found herself on a boat in the sea. *I think I'm right* , Mo'at thought to herself, chalking up the twist of her mouth to be evidence of her unsettledness within the clan. After all, how could someone, coming from such a different way of life, belong so quickly?

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" *I see you, Neytiri.* "

There came no response.

" *Neytiri?* "

Still silence.

"Neycole!"

Now she looked up, her ears perking forward as she realised she was being spoken to. She turned around to see her mentor striding towards her from underneath Hometree. She had woken up and thought she would wait for him just outside, sitting under the shade of the tree's colossal roots. It wasn't the fact she wasn't used to the name – they had been calling each other that for days now and she found it as easy to fit into the other persona as simply as a sock fit a foot.

"Shit. Sorry, Jake, I spaced," she replied, which got a look of concern in response.

"You look upset," he stated, coming to stand beside her. And how she wished she could tell him why. But she knew she shouldn't be inclined to say anything. What would that achieve? How would she even begin? And yet it felt like a knot in her stomach, a knife in her heart – all those clichés that she had never taken seriously. But they all rang with truth. There was a reason they were called clichés – so many people in history and in the future would feel them, yet she couldn't think of a figure who had been in her position, or would be. Fuck, who would be stupid enough to even *get* into her position? She should have known. A deal was a deal even with a dirty dealer, but she should have seen the filth on the edges before agreeing.

She noticed she hadn't actually responded. So she lied. He wouldn't know the difference. "Just fine. Tired, I think."

He looked sympathetic. A warm smile came to his handsome face. *Is that weird? That I think of him as 'handsome'?* she wondered, but she didn't get to answer her own thought as he said, "Then we take it easy today. I think learning language is good."

She was more alert now, and she gave a sarcastic laugh. "I didn't want to trade a physical tiredness for a mental one!" But she didn't get much of a choice as he gestured for them to walk into the forest. As they walked, she couldn't help but feel eyes on her, and turning to look behind her, she saw his mother watching their movements. She felt herself stiffen internally; the way Mo'at was watching her, it was as if she could see into her very soul. *I hope you don't know* , she prayed to some unknown deity. But she knew that *tsahíks* were supposedly very good at intuitive thinking…

"You need to be happy," he said out of the blue as they traipsed through the forest. She was so used to the usual path they took, she was able to sink back into her dark thoughts, letting her feet move her over the mossy floor involuntarily. She knew she was moving, but she didn't feel like she was. In fact, she felt like she was stuck in mud – struggling to get somewhere but being held back.

He didn't recognise the turmoil within her as he leapt down into an overgrown streambed. The years had taken away its water, and within it grew a beautiful garden of green moss and ferns. "Come down," he told her, and she did as she was bid. He sat down and she copied him, but he had to snap his fingers in front of her face to get her to pay proper attention to him. "Neytiri, you are sad."

She groaned. "I'm not sad," she fibbed.

"You are. And when you sad, I sad. So we must make you happy." As if the thought had occurred to him, "I tell you joke?"

She tilted her head to the side and arched an eyebrow. "All right?" she asked hesitantly, wondering what could possibly constitute as a Na'vi joke.

"I hope I tell right. And I hope it is funny in English. It may help you with Na'vi, too." Curious, she folded her legs and put her chin on her hands, listening to him as he cleared his throat to tell her:

"Three *talioang* walk into Hometree. A man turn to first *talioang* and say, 'What is your name?'

The *talioang* say, 'I am *'Aw* .'

'Well *'Aw* , how was your day?' the man ask.

'It good. Been in and out of waterhole all day. What else could a *talioang* want?'

So the man turn to second *talioang* and say, 'What is your name?'

' *Mune* ,' the *talioang* say.

'Well, *Mune* , how was your day?'

'It good. Been in and out of waterhole all day. What else could a *talioang* want?'

So man turn to the third *talioang* and say, 'Let me guess - you are *Pxey* ?'

And the *talioang,* batting her eyelashes, say, 'No, I am Waterhole.' "

It took her a moment, but when understanding clicked, he got what he had wanted – a laugh. And hearing the sound, he chortled with her, happy to see her as such. She shook her head, letting her free-flowing black hair fly around her. "I never thought a *prince* would tell me such a joke!" she laughed, bumping him with her elbow. He reached out to touch her back, but before he could, a thundering sound hit their eardrums. The ground began to quiver underneath them. They both reacted quickly, both jumping to their feet effortlessly. She was as fluid as he was now. As she looked to the source of the tremor, her mouth dropped open.

A solid wall of stampeding sturmbeest – *talioang* . Like an indigo and orange wildebeest, though much taller, much heavier, not to mention faster. And there was several dozen of them beating through the streambed.

"I don't think they liked your joke!" Nicole called as the two of them turned tail and fled. They sprinted down the overgrown bed as fast their legs could carry them, but the thundering herd threatened to overtake them. *Come on, dammit, move!* she thought, and her body obeyed, out of fear and adrenaline coursing through her veins. The wind rushed through her ears and the brush tore at her bare legs from the speed at which they were going.

Above them, about ten metres ahead, she spied an overhanging limb of a tree. She overtook Jake in her speed, and balanced her tail like he had taught. Then, she let her legs push off the ground and leapt into the air, grabbing the wooden log and scrambling up quickly. Peering over the edge, she called, "Jake!", but he was ahead of her as he had jumped up himself. He gripped onto the log, and she grabbed his strong shoulders and helped him up the rest of the way. Breathless, they looked down to see the pure, raw power of the herd charging through the streambed. They had just been down there. Two minutes later and the creatures were gone, the ground churned up by their hooves as they made their way through. Disturbed soil now replaced the moss, but the forest would heal from her laceration quickly.

He gave a shaky laugh, and looked to her. She shook her head at him, chuckling herself, and gave her a mock push. Off balance, he reached out to grab her, and pulled at her shoulders. She gave a yelp as she felt herself falling backwards, but there wasn't a need for her to worry – he still had her in his hold.

And she found herself on her back, her body propped up by his arm as she was leant against his chest. His arms enclosed around her, keeping her steady as she lay on him, her hair free falling behind her. She noticed his tail was flicking in circles, and against her will, so was hers. With this close proximity, her ears picked up his

heartbeat; it was going fast, and she was almost certain it was from the run. She was looking up into his warm gaze, and she couldn't help but see the intense stare he gave her: it held a type of kindness, of affection, that she had come across maybe once or twice in her life. And so she couldn't be entirely sure if that was what she was seeing, or could it possibly be what she was wanting to see?

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The two of them made their way back to Hometree at dusk, laughing and joking. Before they headed for dinner, as due to their frightened flight away from the *talioang,* they needed to refresh up. Her only recourse would be to fix her hair, as she didn't have any other clothing in the clan, though she had slowly been building her wardrobe, so to speak. As the weeks had gone by, she had gained and lost items and according to her ranking. She had gained a belt that hung low around her waist, a knife strap that hung just below her breasts, and an armband around her wrist that helped during her archery.

"I give you something," Jake told her as they headed to one of the honeycombed areas. She realised it was the same one he had first brought her to. It seemed so long ago now. They walked through the entrance, but he put his arm gently against her to stop her. "Wait. Close your eyes."

"Close my eyes?" she echoed, confused, but she did so before he explained.

And he couldn't help but smile to himself as he pulled away from her, going to one of the woven baskets. But he didn't open it. *I hope it's still here* , he thought, as he knew he had hidden it away specifically for her not that long ago. Surely no one would have taken it? There wasn't much in the way of ownership in the Omaticaya Clan – if it wasn't on one's person, or with them constantly, it was free property. He was pleased to see his gift was still there.

"All right… open," he murmured, his voice as soft as a kiss. She opened her eyes, and looked down to his extended hands. There, stretched across his eight fingers, was a choker necklace. Made of twisted brown leather, it held three green stones – a large one in the middle flanked by two smaller ones.

"Holy crap," she murmured, blinking as she took in its beauty.

He smiled at her. "You like?"

"It's so lovely…"

"I make for you."

She couldn't mask her surprise – nor her delight. She reached out with a shaking hand to run her fingers over the cool stone, feeling how smooth, how perfect, it was. But she took it back quickly, unsure. "My Jake, it's beautiful, but I cannot accept that. It should go to…" *It should go to Tsu'tei, you idiot . Not you! Tell him to take it to his fiancée, because that's what she is. Now be a good girl and tell him –*

He came behind her and gently fastened it around her neck. She didn't fight against it. Her mind was screaming at her but she blocked it out. It was easy to do so as she felt his tender touch. Slowly she turned around in his arms, feeling his hands just below her shoulders. She had such an urge to put her hand on him, on his cheek, on his chest…

"Oh – sorry."

The two of them sprung apart like they had been sliced by a knife. He felt his heart start to race for a different reason than Neytiri's closeness as he saw Grace and N'deh come in. His uncle had been the one who had spoken. There was no trace of his thoughts on his face, so he wondered if he ought to be worried of what he could have seen. But based on the way his arm was on Grace's, and they

had both stiffened on seeing the two teenagers, he had an inkling that this wouldn't be brought up again.

"Hey, you two," Grace said, the smile on her face plastered on. "Are you heading to dinner?"

He looked from his student to his teacher, and he blinked once. "Yes, we are. But she just came to change."

"Yes, I did," the younger Avatar smiled, looking at him.

His uncle looked at him, and flicked his tail in the direction of the entrance. "Shall we?" he asked, and he took that as a cue to follow.

"I'll see you up there, then?" she asked.

"See you then, Neytiri," he said. She realised he'd said it without thinking, and she had nodded at him unthinkingly herself, but it was only when Grace pursed her lips did it occur to her of how strange that would have been to her.

The scientist eyed her up and down after the prince and N'deh had taken their leave. "So, he calls you 'Neytiri'?" she asked, now that they were alone. She crossed the room and went to sit upon one of the woven baskets, looking thoughtfully at her.

Nicole smiled and nodded. "It's cute, isn't it?"

Grace didn't agree or disagree. She just shrugged and said noncommittally, "Interesting choice of name."

"Why?"

"Just the actual meaning behind it."

She found herself in a state of curiosity now. She'd asked 'Why', but didn't expect to get a proper answer. "So it's an actual name?" she asked, astounded. She gave a snort of laughter. "Wow, I feel bad. I honestly thought he just… threw a few letters together because it

vaguely sounded like a Na'vi version of 'Nicole'." Grace was still watching her with unreadable eyes. "We decided to give each other nicknames to make it easier for both of us. So I call him 'Jake' in return."

She leant back on the wicker baskets, her eyes still regarding her. "No it's a legitimate name," she finally said, ignoring her previous explanation. "It's just an…" She mused for a second, obviously to try and find the right word. "An interesting choice."

"Why?" she asked, frowning, wondering if he had given her a horrible name. Maybe it meant 'moron' or something. Considering how he joked, she wouldn't have put it past him to do something such as that.

But it turned out to be something quite different. Something that made her heart flare yet also made her blood run cold. Something that excited her yet terrified her. Something that made her so exultant she could run a million miles, yet so distraught that she felt she could curl up and die right then and there. And if she did… it would be so much better for everyone.

"It means 'Beautiful one'."

• • •

She was fitful that night. As the clock ticked by, the numbers showcasing how every minute closer to the next day came, she couldn't sleep. She lay awake, watching it. There was no need for her to go out into the wilderness – her mind was already a jungle.

He's going to die. He's going to die and it's going to be all my fault…

She bit her lip, feeling her heart pang. She wanted to cry and she couldn't. She wanted to scream but what would it achieve? Nothing would change. Every second seemed to march her closer to D Day. The day she would be bringing out.

I can't let this happen. How could I live with myself if you died…? What would I do?

She was on a ship that was going under. She was adrift with the waves. As she lay in her hard bed in RDA, she wanted to tuck the covers in around her like a protective cocoon. She wished she could just stay there forever. But if she did, nothing would ever change.

He called you 'Beautiful one'.

She recalled his laugh, his smile, the soft touch of his hand on hers. The closeness they shared. They were like kindred spirits, and she didn't know how she would go on knowing that what was done, could have been prevented.

Could have been prevented. Could be prevented. Will be prevented…

She sat up so fast it felt like her brain hit against her skull. She had contemplated it before but she hadn't wanted to do it. Now it would be her only choice. She couldn't fix this alone.

She pulled her wheelchair over to the side of her bed, using her strong arm muscles to pull herself in. Fuck it. She'd rather be in this for the rest of her life than having Jake dead. She would not let him be sacrificed so she could walk. No. She was not going to do it.

Determined, she wheeled herself out of the dormitory, being as stealthy as she could. None of her neighbours stirred. She had to smile; it had been him who had taught her tricks to be so silent.

I've got to do this. For you. I will not watch you die.

She moved herself out of the room, and once she was away from the sleepers, she pumped her wheels to go full speed. She drove herself past the cafeteria, towards the labs, but instead of going towards the door that would take her to the administrative area, she went to the one next to it. Ahead of her sprawled a bare hallway, and at the end

of it was a large door. As she came close, she noticed it needed a key card. She took the one on the lanyard from around her neck, and put it next to the sensor. *Come on, come on…* She heard the *beep!* and the *click!* The door opened before her. *Thank Eywa.* And she slowly wheeled herself inside.

The sound of snoring hit her ears, and she saw the bunks of beds. There were about ten people in this dormitory, and she could only hope that the one she sought was on the lower level. Cautiously, she moved through the room, her eyes darting across the beds, seeing who was where. And then she saw the tousled red hair and knew it was her. And the wheezing snoring confirmed it. All that smoking had obviously affected her breathing.

Wheeling herself over, she put a hand on her shoulder, and shook her. "Grace? Grace?" she whispered.

There was no response the first couple of tries, but by the third there was a painful sounding snort of shock that rumbled through her nose. Her eyes flashed open, and she groaned. "What?" she murmured drowsily, looking over to see who had disturbed her. She seemed to wake up even more when she noticed who it was, and perhaps took in the look on her face. "Nicole? What's going on…?"

She swallowed, having no idea where to start. "I need your help."

• • •

"I'm going to need a lot of booze to handle this shit." She let another lot of the burning brown beverage run down her throat. Grace's face scrunched up at its blaze, shaking it off. She looked at Nicole as she poured another one. "You really stepped in some serious crap, girl," she said.

The marine's head was in her hands. "At the time, I didn't know. All right? I didn't know what I was agreeing to?"

"Did your mother never teach you to read the damn fine print?" she countered angrily, feeling her hands turn to fists. She was clenching them so hard that even with her short nails, she could feel them digging into her palm. The pain told her this wasn't a shitty ass nightmare. She didn't know if that was good to know or awful. "You don't make a deal with the devil, Nicole! When did that ever work out for anyone? Did you never read *Paradise Lost* ? Because guess what, you're about to get us thrown out of the Garden of Eden!"

"I know I screwed up, Grace! I know that! I've known that for days!"

She had been just about to take another shot when her words sunk in. "How long have you known about this?"

This was where Nicole faltered. "Three, four days?" she tried.

Grace put the glass down onto the lab table with a *clunk.* The sound was harsh and final. "Jesus Christ. Well that's just fucking lovely," she snarled, and Nicole had the decency to look ashamed. "What was your plan, huh? To never tell me? To watch as everyone *died* ?"

"I was trying to sort this out on my own!"

"This is way too big for anyone one person to sort out," she mumbled, eyeing the bottle of tequila as if she couldn't decide if it were an ally or a sworn enemy.

She didn't know what to think. What to say. How ironic. *You would think the girls around would be your best associates, but they are just as detrimental as men.* She would have expected this behaviour from a man. She never thought she'd have to deal with it from a woman. Right now, she was too angry to even contemplate how truly upsetting this was. How deadly. How destructive it would be. All she could think of was the betrayal. *I trusted you,* Grace could only think, chewing on her lip.

There was silence between them for several long moments. It was just as well – there was nothing Nicole could say that would make

this better. But she tried. "I can't let them die, Grace. I know that now. But look, at the time, I didn't know that's what it meant. I thought… I don't even know what I thought at the time. You have to believe that…"

All she could believe was that the person she thought was different was just the same. The same type of human being. The one who sold out anything for a cut of the prize. Just like Parker. Just like Miles. All of them. And what hurt the most was that she had invested in Nicole, only to find that she did not yield a good return.

But at the same time, this was all they had. They were the two Avatars in the Omaticaya clan. They had an in. The administration could have faith in the fact that they supposedly had an in with the Na'vi through them. They weren't counting on the door closing to them.

"So what do we do?" Nicole asked softly. She sounded like a child who had come to their mother, hoping the problem could be solved.

Grace said nothing for a moment, just thinking. Then she stood up, crossing the room. She swiped her fingers across the glass screen of her tablet, and typed on the screen.

Nicole wheeled herself over behind Grace, watching. *What is she doing?* she wondered as she saw the application for video chat come up. It was two in the morning. There was the *bzzt! bzzt!* sound of the dial tone, and then the screen moved as the person answered. She saw Trudy, her eyes full of sleep and her hair in a messy bun, answer drowsily from her own bed. Nicole couldn't be sure, but she felt like she saw movement beside the young pilot. But she didn't get a good glance as Trudy asked, "Grace? What's going on?"

"Trudy." The scientist's voice carried authority as she said, "Start up your helicopter at 0400 please. We're getting the hell out of dodge."

Chapter Seven

We're getting into the nitty-gritty of it right now, everyone. I hope you're all still enjoying it, and please continue to review. Enjoy.

Chapter Seven

Despite the roar of the helicopter, she felt as if she were in a deafening silence. She could feel the deep freeze radiating off Grace, and that was enough to unsettle her. Her boss was drumming her fingers on her leg, biting the skin off her lower lip until it bled. Seeing as Trudy knew where she was going – some site in the mountains was all Nicole had learnt – there was an unnerving silence of dialogue.

The sun was just coming up on the horizon, casting a beautiful orange glow. Grace put her hands up in front of her face as the morning light hit her, the heat of it searing into her skin. It would be a hot day but she had never felt so feverish. She felt chills running all over her body, her white skin feeling as if there were insects clambering all over her. Surely it was psychosomatic – she felt like she was coming down with something. And the only antidote she could think of was to keep her eyes away from *her.*

"I'm going to have to be careful around here, guys," came Trudy's voice through their headsets. "The magnetic fields tend to mess up my instruments around here."

Nicole had never seen this area before. They flew by natural rock arches, reaching hundreds of metres into the sky. They seemed to be rolling and merging together, and as she looked down into the opening, she could see a strange purple colouration. Squinting closer, she realised it was a tree. An odd looking willow-like species with pink tendrils. *I wonder what that is* , she wondered, but feeling her companion's frostiness, she sadly doubted she would be told.

"The Tree of Souls," Grace announced like a newscaster. Despite her antagonism, she never passed up an opportunity to impart knowledge. "It's their most sacred place." Her eyes softened as she looked at it. "There is something… very interesting going on there biologically. I'd love to get samples. Though I don't think I can considering this plot to uproot the whole place."

One of those sentences were not like the others – from a soft, musing tone, it had turned cruel. Nicole sighed, putting her head in her hands, at an absolute loss of what to say. "Are you still mad at me?" she asked diffidently.

"Yes." Grace cast her eyes away from seeing the girl's reaction and watched the scenery below. The beautiful Eden that would be destroyed. All because of that girl! And her selfishness. She wanted to slap her, shake her, and make her realise exactly what would happen. They'd lose everyone. The people who had done so much for them, taught them so much. The people they loved. Her stomach roiled at the thought, and to find strength, she kept her eyes focused on the cockpit, not permitting herself to look in the marine's direction. She didn't know what she would do if she did. She didn't feel like herself. She didn't trust herself to look at her.

She had been right all along. Military people were nothing but trouble.

"I did it for you, you know," Nicole said.

"Stop being a bullshit artist – "

"No, you wanna know the truth? If I didn't consent you wouldn't be here right now." Slowly the scientist looked over to her. There was no rapid blinking, no licking of the lips – nothing that suggested a lie. She kept her brow furrowed but listened. "Parker threatened to send you back to Earth if I said no. If I said no, he would – he would just…" Nicole looked down at the floor, her expression pained. "You know, there are many different smarts, Grace. I may not be Einstein

or you, but I know. I know how much you love this place. You'd rather slit your own wrists than leave."

Grace eyed her for a long moment, and then turned away. Her expression was enigmatic. Nothing more was said between them.

The military shack was up in the Hallejuah Mountains. In the virgin morning rays, not as many *ikran* were awake, and the air was rather still. Nevertheless, Nicole's eyes darted about furtively as they came to land, worried that one of those medusa might come again. She hadn't forgotten. The propellers stopped their spinning, allowing the grass to spring back from being forced to bow under the wind. They were pushed right back as Grace jumped out, her boots crushing them. Nicole grimaced – she'd never seen her this pissed off. Even the door to the place seemed to take a beating as it was pushed with more force than necessary.

If Hell's Gate was named such for the conditions, then the shack was Purgatory. It was a small, repugnant place. She felt like she was back in her Earth apartment with the size of it. The smell of stale air hung around; dust ran throughout the sleeping area, to the kitchenette, to the link chambers, and the bathroom. It was a dark place, even with the natural light coming through the massive windows that made up most of the wall to the right. And it would be even darker with Grace's mood – she couldn't help but notice that her hands were shaking as she opened up her cigarette packet to light one, standing over the small sink in the kitchenette.

Trudy didn't appear to be in on the private drama: she was all smiles as she handed Grace and Nicole the packs. She had almost a glow to her, which she didn't know whether to be suspicious about, or grateful for. At least someone wasn't wanting her to disappear. "All right, you gals got supplies for 'bout two days. But I'll come by tomorrow with some more."

"You know of our deal, Trudy." The scientist had killed her cigarette by dropping it into a mug she filled with water at the sink. "Keep where we are quiet."

The pilot nodded, before giving a sigh. The smile faded a little. "You know I can't help but worry you're going to assassinate her."

Nicole huffed, looking out to see the floating mountains. She focused her eyes on a waterfall that cascaded off one, the water running off and disappearing into vapour. Grace cleared her throat, taking the bags and walking Trudy to the door. As the two put on their masks to go outside once more, she took the chance to look around at the new dwellings they had. This place made a resentment come to her. It burned within her and made her grit her teeth. *This is all your fault. They do not need to die. And if they do, you'll end up in a place like this, without a view like that – you'll be back in the concrete scum that is Earth.*

Desperate for some relief from her thoughts, she rolled herself around the kitchenette, finding it hard to navigate in the small space. There was a table to seat four in the centre, which blocked her chance at getting to the sink. So she resigned herself to sit by the fridge, looking at the masking tape that had handwritten on it, 'Food in this fridge only!' Decorating the area around the tape were printed photos. She looked them over, spying Grace in almost all of them. But as she looked closer, she pinned more faces. There was one of Grace, lying sprawled on the school floor, smiling as she instructed some children who watched her, enraptured. Then there was another of her in front of the school, sitting on the steps with two young boys beside her, and a young girl who knelt at the foot of the steps, giving a shy smile. Her heart leapt as she realised she was looking at younger versions of Ja'kanhe and Tzu'khan. And – holy hell – that was Tsu'tei, the one who was smiling at the camera that would give Earth models a run for their money. So obviously those two weren't utter assholes to her once upon a time.

She noticed there were two other photos, but she didn't get to properly study them as she heard the door opening. As the cabin depressurised, she began to move away from the kitchenette, knowing Grace wouldn't want to see her. But as she began to head

towards the section that held the link chambers, the door opened, and she was trapped.

"I'm, uh, going to link up," she announced, wheeling herself away.

"Yep," came the curt reply. "Use the one on the far end. She's the least glitchy."

"'Kay."

Grace sat down at the table, and stopped herself from lighting another cigarette. As it was, with the amount of worry she had been having the past hour, she had nearly run out of them. From a pack of 25 it had dwindled down to 10. Perhaps that was a contributing factor to how sick she felt.

She sighed, watching the form of the marine wheeling herself away. She was in a rock and a hard place. Nicole had done it for her. Herself as well, granted, but there was never such thing as an unselfish good deed. And right now, they needed one another. Neither of them could solve this alone. "I'm not mad at you," she finally said.

The wheels stopped. She slowly turned around, looking perplexed. Grace continued. "I understand. I mean, I… I get why you did it. When Quaritch offers something, it's go big or go home." She toyed with the end of a cigarette, before closing the pack completely and sending it spinning across the table so she wouldn't be tempted. She focused her eyes on the young woman. "I get why you took it," she admitted, believing the words more and more as she said them. "You're an extremely independent woman." She gestured to her chair with her foot, eliciting a small laugh from her. "In your head. Your body can't keep up. And that's gotta be tough on you."

There was a beat, before the wheelchair bound girl came over, coming to sit at the table. Her expression was calmer. "Look, I know I fucked up. Royally."

"I know. But I also know it's hard to make allies in Pandora. In RDA. You know to meet people you can trust. And for some reason it's harder to do so with other women, which you'd think would be easier."

"You're telling me."

Now that the duo had settled on their affiliation in this regard, Grace became all business. The water was under the bridge, and they had to work. "How long do we have?"

"Two months," Nicole said, straightening in her chair and coming closer to the table. She picked up her wrist which had a watch, looking at the date. "He never gave me an exact date." She frowned, trying to do some calculations. "I arrived here June 23rd. He spoke to me June 24th. So then – "

"So then August 24th approximately," Grace finished, sighing. She massaged her temples, groaning as the realisation came. "We've got eight weeks and three days. And I'm going to be bold and say seven weeks, because Miles is known for jumping the gun."

There was a very pregnant pause. As the harsh reality of the situation dawned upon them, they exchanged nervous glances. How would they protect the clan against this? What were they even supposed to do? They were both lost, terrified. But the one thing that they also were was determined, and sometimes, that was all one needed.

"You have to talk to Jake." Nicole's expression transitioned from anxiety to surprise. *You called him 'Jake',* she could only think. But she focused back when Grace said: "When you link up, find him and talk to him. You have to. Get him to listen to you, because something tells me he will."

• • •

Council meetings were never her thing.

As Tsu'tei sat in one of the larger areas of Hometree, surrounded by the Tsan'ten family, and all the heads of the Omaticaya clan, she found herself drifting away from their words. As Eytukan told them of new boundaries, retracting and adding new laws, she let herself pretend she was sitting where Mo'at was. In fact, she realised that Eytukan's face changed to his son's, Ja'kanhe's, who sat on his left. She let herself be caught up in her little daydream – she'd be interested in politics the day she was actually integral to its decisions. For now, her presence was merely a formality, and a chance for her to see the true happenings of the clan.

And she noticed that Ja'kanhe seemed to have drifted off, too; his eyes were glazed as he focused on a spot on the floor on which they sat, cross-legged on woven mats. Tzu'khan was beside him, looking as if he were hanging onto every word his father said. *And then you'd go right ahead and disrespect everything he said to you* , was all she could think.

There were times in her life – not often, but it was occurring to her that this past moon it had happened the most – when she was glad he had left. He had become a changed man the moment Akwete died. Trauma did that to people, she knew. She would never accuse him of his mourning. But how different, how terrifying he had been after the fact. He snapped at people with little disregard for his words. He had made his own *ikran* scared every time he flew. There was a darkness that had collected inside him and it had obviously not dissolved. The hope that a change of scenery would alter him had not gone to plan.

But she couldn't help but wonder what it was like. For she hadn't been there on the day. She had been back at the clan, learning from Mo'at of talking to spirits rather than learning arithmetic with Grace. What horrors had he seen? What was it like to see the one you loved so eternally turn cold right in your arms? She swallowed, feeling guilty for her thoughts. He couldn't help it. Eywa hadn't smiled upon him that day.

And then she cast her eyes over to Ja'kanhe. *How strange how two people born of the same parents can be so different,* she thought, watching him. They may not love one another, but she knew he would treat her much better than his brother. Not his own fault, but Tzu'khan was not in a position mentally to take anyone else into his life. She had little doubt in her mind that if it had happened, their lives would have been filled with nothing but arguments and distress. With Ja'kanhe, she had a feeling it would be calmer; he hated confrontation. It was a horrible comparison to make, and a part of her felt guilty for even thinking it, but it was true. Perhaps it was her positive thoughts about him that caused him to look directly at her. She felt embarrassed, and began to look away, but he gave her a twitch of a smile. Eventually, she returned it. A truce, she assumed, for what had been said between them a few days ago. She'd honestly been feeling horrible for it. In all fairness, she knew that she had been the one who started their disagreement, and she also knew he had tried to apologise for it before she cut his words off. So the two shared their smile from their positions across the room, and from the way his tail flicked ever so slightly, she knew that they were all right. It was forgotten. That was how it was in the clan, and in the family – disagreements were quickly extinguished. Just as her bad thoughts of Tzu'khan were quickly pushed aside.

" *Now I have a bit of an announcement,* " Mo'at began, and she realised that Eytukan had stopped speaking to allow his mate to do so. " *I have heard from Eywa that an auspicious day will be coming tomorrow.* "

Tsu'tei's ears perked up. The high council – twenty of the Omaticaya in all – began speaking in hushed and excited tones. What auspicious day could this possibly be? Confused, she tried to seek out Ja'kanhe's eyes, wondering… *No. Surely not. Maybe?* Her heart began to hammer in her chest so hard. The enthusiasm and curiosity around her began to rub off, and it intensified as Mo'at got her youngest to stand up. *Oh my Eywa.*

Mo'at smiled at her son, extending her hands to take his own. " *Come, my son.* "

A smile came to Tsu'tei's face, and she got ready to stand up, knowing that the *tsahík* would ask for her, too. *Tsu'tei and Ja'kanhe will be mated tomorrow, as Eywa has said* , she would say. And everyone would cheer. The clan would have their next leaders for whenever Eytukan and Mo'at decided to step down. She would be a princess. A proper princess, not just a formal title. She propped herself up on her hand, ready to stand.

" *Neycole will become a member of the Omaticaya clan tomorrow.* "

Her smile faded so quickly it was as if a stick had been driven into a water gourd and it had been drained of all its contents. Meanwhile, Ja'kanhe's face was as illuminate as the forest at night. He gripped his mother's hands tighter. " *Really?* " he asked in such a cheerful tone it made her feel physically sick. Her heart was still hammering in her chest even though her mind had accepted the fact it wasn't what she had thought. She felt incredibly disjointed.

" *Really* ," Mo'at replied, all smiles herself. " *She told me last night. She obviously heard what you wanted and realised you were right. You know, sometimes tsahíks can be mistaken, but our Mother is never wrong.* "

She really couldn't believe what she was hearing, especially as the members around her began to voice their congratulations, standing up to greet him. Eytukan was jovial, giving his mate a kiss on the temple and complimenting his youngest on his exceptional student.

" *What the hell!* " Tsu'tei hissed, utterly annoyed.

She'd said it at the wrong moment – there had been a lull in the noise of blessings and felicitations, and it caused her words to be heard clear as day. All the pairs of eyes went right to her. Eytukan looked confused; Ja'kanhe shot her a look; Mo'at was incredulous at the blaspheme that came from her mouth. So, she just looked

behind her as she was surrounded by the council, and muttered towards a random member, " *Shh!* "

" *This is fantastic news!* " the young prince exclaimed, giving his mother a hug. " *I must go and tell her, right away! She has to prepare.* "

He was given a push towards the entrance. " *Go, go!* " his mother told him. She watched as he disappeared, and realised that she wasn't the only one watching him – Tzu'khan's eyes were following his movement too, and when they came over to her, she saw the same worry that she had. *Maybe you are better than I think* , she thought to herself, excusing herself from the meeting and heading out of the area.

When she came into the hallway, Ja'kanhe was already long gone. Gone off to find the Avatar. The demon. She didn't understand this obsession with her… She wasn't remarkable. If anything, the reason she had such a status in the clan was that she was an anomaly. It was the only reason. Gritting her teeth, she turned quickly away from the meeting area, heading in the opposite direction to her fiancé. She needed to clear her head. She wanted to just jump onto her *ikran* and fly for hours. That sounded like a good day to her right now. She didn't know whether to scream or burst into tears. She could decide that on the way. Just being away from the clan – from *her* – sounded like her best option.

But fate had other plans. As she rounded a corner, heading towards the spiral staircase that would lead her to the top of the tree, she ran right into the person she was trying to avoid. Ja'kanhe obviously went to her hammock to rouse her, but she was here. *Perfect* , Tsu'tei thought angrily. Her tail was rigid and her blood boiled as she tried to step away from Neycole, but the Avatar sidestepped as well, causing them to knock into one another with a *smack!*

"I'm so sorry," Neycole apologised.

"Yes, you should be."

The words were out of Tsu'tei's mouth before she could stop them. The Avatar – whose eyes had been on the floor when she walked, causing the collision – now looked at her. She didn't move fast enough away, for the five-fingered alien hand came and took her shoulder, turning her around. Tsu'tei snarled a warning. *I could get you in major trouble for that* , she thought. But the demon just frowned at her. "You know, you've had it in for me since day one. What is your beef, Tsu'tei?"

She just looked away, holding her head up high. She tilted her chin in the way Ja'kanhe had gone. "He's looking for you. I suppose, how you say, 'congratulations'? You be one of us, tomorrow."

Disbelief crossed the Avatar's features. "Really?"

"Really. Well done. I shall pray you do not fall off cliff. It takes someone who is strong to not do so."

The alien's ears perked forward, and she frowned deeply. "Seriously, girl. What is your problem?"

She paused for a long moment, thinking of how to word it. In Na'vi, she'd have no problem, but Neycole wasn't quite fluent in it yet. *She's becoming a member with barely any knowledge . How backward is that?* "You know," Tsu'tei began, softening her tone. "When I little, Mo'at tell me I was very lucky. I had all the weapons a woman needs to prosper in world – cunning, wit, insight, beauty and bravery."

Neycole shrugged. "Yeah, so?"

If someone passed in the hall, and saw the way she smiled, one might have the thought that she was a mother looking adoringly at a baby. But this is what she said:

"So take good care of your looks, Neycole. You do not have any other weapons at your disposal."

It was at that moment that Ja'kanhe came around the corner, catching the last of that conversation. He cleared his throat and sounded stern as he said, "Enough, Tsu'tei. Leave." She looked at him carefully, and gave a sweeping bow, before departing.

• • •

She was fuming at the words of Tsu'tei, and it was only when she felt Ja'kanhe's warm touch on her shoulder that she calmed down ever so slightly. "Are you all right?" he asked, turning her around to face him. But then he remembered, and gave a sardonic smile. "I assume, a 'stupid-ass question'?"

And that would have been the answer she responded with, if it weren't for the fact that a more prominent line from Tsu'tei had stuck in her mind. She touched his hand with her own, feeling pointedly calmer. "Is it true what she said?" she asked him, looking into his golden irises. When he looked confused, she went on: "That I'm becoming a member of the clan tomorrow?"

He looked suddenly angry, but it wasn't aimed at her. He shot arrows from his eyes in the direction she had left. "She told you?" he growled.

"Yes, she did."

And she assumed that he was angry perhaps because it wasn't true, but instead it was something far simpler than that. "I wanted to tell you that!" he said, sounding as peevish as a child when something didn't go their way. And it made her smile. "That was what I was coming to tell. She had no right!"

"No, no – she didn't. But it's true?" she asked. He nodded at her – a very human gesture. She knew it was her cue to smile, to thank him profusely for it, to seek Mo'at and Eytukan out and thank them too, Eywa as well. But the thoughts of the conversation with Grace weighed too heavily on her mind.

"Are you not happy with it?" he asked softly.

"No, of course I am!" she replied, giving a shaky smile. He gave her a confident one. *I hope your judgement is well placed* , was all she could think.

His hand moved down from her shoulder, coming to take hers in his own. He tilted his head to the side, and she walked with him, heading towards a small alcove. It was yet another one she hadn't been to. She found herself wondering how long it would take for her to discover every nook and cranny within the tree. And the plan RDA held was to destroy it all – this incredible place. She felt her heart hammering in her chest. *Now, do it now. Rip it off like a bandaid. Just do it.* "My Jake, I must – "

"Here, sit," he told her, taking two woven mats from the side of the room and placing them close, across from one another. She did as he said, crossing her legs like he. She had learnt the proper etiquette, of how to fold her tail neatly, to sit up straight which took a lot of core strength as she had nothing to lean back on, and how to fold her hands in her lap. She assumed this position now – the position when in formal company – but he was far more casual. He leant back on his hands as he looked at her, and seeing how the situation changed, she copied him. He smiled a little at her. "You know, you are only one who sits so comfortably with me."

She decided not to admit that while she did it because she was comfortable in his presence, she also did it because sitting in such a position for so long did a number on her lower back. Her muscles were stronger, though not that strong. She just smiled at him and shrugged. "You're my best friend. I've also been attached to you for the past almost month practically eighteen hours a day. If I'm not comfortable around you, I'm worried."

He laughed at her, before his expression turned sombre. He leaned forward then, crossing his arms in his lap as he watched her. "I brought you in here so you could prepare for tomorrow." She

swallowed. "If you succeed in getting your *ikran* , you will become a member of the clan."

She nodded slowly, taking that in. He'd briefed her on what it involved, and it made a knot in her stomach that just added to the pile that were already growing. "Any tips, comrade?" she inquired.

"Don't die." It may have come off as another of his jokes, but she knew he was serious. He'd told her multiple stories of how it worked. Tomorrow she would ascend the *inikimaya* – The Stairway to Heaven. Rocks that led up to the *ikran* rookery in the Hallejuah Mountains. She wasn't ashamed to admit she was scared, especially if it was tomorrow. Was she even ready for it?

She wasn't ready for his next sentence. "I do not know what I would do if you died."

She had drifted off into her world of thoughts, but she was brought back to reality when he said that. She just looked at him, seeing the earnestness, the fear, the fondness in his eyes. She wondered what her eyes were saying to him right now. Slowly, she put a hand out to him, resting it on his cheek. He just looked at her, nuzzling into her palm softly, closing his eyes. His nostrils seemed to quiver as he took in her scent. She swallowed the lump that tickled in her throat. " *I do not know what to do if you died* ," she murmured in his language.

His eyes flashed open, and he gave her subtle smile. Whether for pride at her enunciation, or for what she said, at first she couldn't tell. He put his hand on her forearm, his thumb rubbing against her skin. "I will not," he murmured, his eyes giving the impression that hers was the most absurd statement he had ever heard.

I pray for it, Jake. Oh Eywa you have no idea...

She let him go. An instinct deep-seated within her told her to, and it was just as well since N'deh came around the corner, looking for her. His eyes seemed to light up with relief at the sight of her. "Neytiri,

Ja'kanhe," he greeted, touching his fingers to his forehead and then to them. She smiled and did the same just as his nephew did. "Have you seen Grace?"

She shook her head slowly. "No. I assumed she linked up after me."

"Oh," he said, his ears going down momentarily as he realised she wouldn't be coming in. He seemed terribly disappointed for it. "Well, when you see her, tell her I say hello?"

She assured him she would. Once he left them, she felt horrible on the inside. *Grace is probably avoiding you* , she thought.

• • •

Grace wasn't in the shack when she unlinked, but a note was on her tablet that read: ' *I'm outside doing some fieldwork. Couldn't face the clan today. Be good. – Grace.* ' So she had been right. Giving a sigh, she pulled off the sticky note and sat at the desk, looking through the large glass window to the world outside.

She didn't tell Jake. Not today. He had been far too preoccupied with preparing her for the next day, giving her pointers of exactly how to act and telling her to get a good night's sleep. If only he knew that that would be physically impossible. She saw no chance of her getting a wink of sleep. It was 7:30 pm. Usually she'd only get back at 10, or sometimes even closer to 12. She hoped Grace wouldn't return and immediately jump to the conclusion that telling Ja'kanhe had gone badly. Though she couldn't help but feel a little insulted that she hadn't even come to see the potential outcome of it.

Quashing the thought, she looked down at the tablet. She knew she wouldn't get any sleep right now – her body clock wouldn't allow it. So she figured she'd hook the tablet to the cameras they used for their video diaries, and put one down. But as she flicked her fingers over the surface, it came to life with the application for viewing such videos. There was a video ready for playing, and her curiosity was piqued when she saw Grace and N'deh within it. They were sitting in

one of the alcoves of Hometree, side by side. *This must have been what she got for Marcia* , she thought, pressing the triangle to get it to start.

The first shot wasn't actually of Grace and N'deh sitting, but rather she adjusting the camera while he sat behind her, craning his neck over to try and see what she was doing. And at the angle she had chosen to fix it, Nicole's eyes widened as she got a nice view of her boss's cleavage. "Are you sure you know what you are doing?" N'deh asked her.

"Relax, I see Marcia working these all the time!" Grace replied, coming to sit down and adjusting the camera again. She had obviously placed it on a basket or some item for leverage, so she could sit beside him. Now that her face was in focus she could see the slight purple blotching of the bruise she had had at the time, though it was only there if one knew what they were looking for.

N'deh looked bemused as he focused on the camera, and voiced Nicole's previous thoughts: "I am sure Earth will enjoy a video of your Avatar's breasts. I hope your military boss will not be watching this."

Nicole and video-Grace laughed and made a face simultaneously. "Ick!" Grace laughed, nudging him and making him chortle with her. "You are disgusting. Do you know that? You are a disgusting little man."

"Thank you," he said, turning back to his deadpan ways.

"Either way, this video can be just for us. I only have a few photos of you, after all."

"You never shown me those."

"Well come and visit my human form and you can see them. All these years, you've never actually seen me as, well, real me."

He cast his eyes to look properly at her this time. His fingers reached out to touch her forehead gently, and she appeared to have a softer expression at it. "This is real you," he murmured. "You are real. This body is real. This spirit is real." Even in the lower video quality, she could see the luminous expression, the infinitely deep look he gave her. "Spirit is all that matters." His fingers then moved to brush her bruised cheekbone, as soft as a feather dancing across her skin. He then looked very mock concerned, and moved his hand to press against her forehead. "Oh. Oh dear."

"What?" Grace asked, her ears moving. "Is something wrong? Am I going to die?"

"Do not fret – I learnt from healers how to break bad news. My Grace," he said, taking her hand and holding it up in his own in a very dramatic display. "It truly pains me to tell you this… You only have seven or eight decades left to live."

The scientist burst into laughter. "Wow, only that, huh?"

"I know this is very hard for you to accept. But you must stay strong." And then – in a move that made Nicole's heart skip a beat – he lifted up their hands to press a kiss to hers.

She took her hand out of his and chuckled. "Ah! No, no, no! Are you not scared that I will pass on my disease then?" She looked back down to where she had dropped her hands. "How could I possibly be happy for my remaining 70 or 80 years that I had doomed you, as well?"

"Well," he murmured, nudging the side of her face with his forehead. "That be fine. Because a 100 or 120 years with you be filled with more happiness than an extra 20 without you. You will live a long and happy life. With me."

The video kept going but Nicole wasn't focusing any longer. She slowly moved away from the tablet, going to sit back at the table in the kitchenette, and play the waiting game.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, and the *ikran* became lesser whilst the insects became greater, Grace put away her instruments and decided to call it a day. Walking back to the shack, she opened and closed the door, standing in the little space meant for up to three people for the air to clear. Once the main door's light turned green, she stepped into the shack, and was surprised to see Nicole there. "Hey," she said, shrugging off her jacket. The marine was staring straight ahead, only giving a grunt of greeting in return. Arching her eyebrows, Grace put her jacket onto a hook and came properly inside. "You're back early." And once she thought of the implication, she gulped. "Oh God, did it - ?"

"Jake sent me back early. It seems I will be becoming one of the clan tomorrow."

Wow, I never would have put money on that answer , she thought, but an involuntary smile came over her face. Some good news for a shitty day. "Holy crap! Congratulations! In three weeks… Jesus, that's fucking incredible."

"It will be good. They'll most likely trust me more."

"Oh wow, absolutely. Not to say they don't already. The Tsan'ten's do regard you highly."

"Where'd you hear that?"

She gave a smile as she came into the kitchen, feeling infinitely better about the whole plan. "You forget I'm close with Eytukan's younger brother," she reminded, ruffling Nicole's hair as she passed. She stretched her back a little. "You hungry?"

"No I didn't forget. Because obviously you're sleeping with him."

It stopped her dead in her tracks. *And there's the answer I thought I'd get* , Nicole thought to herself, sitting back in her chair as Grace moved in a robotic way around to face her. She looked as if she had been punched in the gut. "Excuse me?"

"You. You're sleeping with N'deh, are you not?"

Grace felt her heart rate pick up. *Deny it* , she thought as she gave a spluttered laugh. "Um, okay," she began, frowning at Nicole. "Why – why are you asking me this? Where the hell did this come from? That's crazy! I mean that's just… crazy."

"Grace, you are a scientist. Not a scientist slash actress."

When she opened her mouth to protest the point, Nicole continued: "I saw the video. On your tablet. What was my favourite line? 'You will live a long and happy life. With me.'? Pretty sure that's how it went." At this point, the scientist had lowered herself into a chair, and put her head in her hands. Nicole got the answer without her explicitly saying 'Yes'. She breathed out, not sure exactly how to react to the actual confirmation. "Look, Grace, don't think I'm mad. Hell I'm far from mad. I'm happy for you, hey? I am!" She reached across the table with a smile, nudging Grace's arm; the scientist didn't move. "You know, you put on this… I hate to say it, but you put on a mask. For the humans. I've seen you around the clan, you're spastically happy. You don't have that mask. Everyone deserves to be that way. Everyone. And N'deh clearly cares about you, I've seen that throughout. So hey, calm down – I approve of your boyfriend."

There came no response, and Nicole bit her lip. *Shouldn't have said anything, you idiot* , she thought to herself, mentally kicking herself until Grace said meekly, "He's not my boyfriend."

She gave a crooked smile. "Sure, keep deluding yourself. I saw the video, Grace. I know the truth."

"No… He's my husband." She'd never told any human that. She bit her lip, nervously looking at Nicole to see her reaction. It was as she'd expected: aghast.

"Wait, what?"

Grace slowly stood up from the table, moving over to fridge. She removed the photos from the glass front, and put them in front of the young girl. The first one was of her and N'deh, sitting in a field together, his head resting on her shoulder while she laughed at something he'd obviously said. And the second was her favourite. It was the royal family, lined up like a Christmas card in front of Hometree. A younger Ja'kanhe stood, smiling charmingly at the camera, his arm on his mother's. Mo'at and Eytukan stood, the two of them leaning in towards the middle. The ones in the middle were N'deh and Grace, his arms encircling her middle while she grinned at the camera. She was actually dressed in clan clothing this time, wearing a beautiful beaded top, her hair hanging loosely around her shoulders with a flower on the side. Beside them on the other side was Tzu'khan, holding hands with a woman Nicole didn't recognise, but logic dictated that was Akwete, looking radiant and gorgeous. And beside her was Tsu'tei, leaning in and smiling as well. The Tsan'ten family.

"Legally in the human world, I'm Grace Augustine. But with the Omaticaya, I'm Grace Tsan'ten," she murmured, nodding slowly. "He's my husband. Or, using their terms, my mate."

Nicole felt shell-shocked. She could only slowly bring herself to look at Grace, initially wondering if this was some practical joke, but one look at her face said otherwise. She had a terrible feeling of dread wash over her. "Do they actually…? Does the family know?"

"Of course they know!" Grace exclaimed, looking scandalised. She tapped at the last photo. "That was our… well our wedding day, if you're using human terms. That was five years ago.

"Well honestly, initially we didn't tell anyone… We just did it, not knowing if it would even work. You can't change the fact that technically, Avatar drivers are a sub-species. I'd heard of it happening in other human bases and, actually, we did have someone closer to home who said it worked but we just didn't know… And if it was a failure, we wanted it to be a private one. But – wait, has Jake explained…?"

Nicole nodded. "Yes. He explained *tshayleu* to me. With another Na'vi. He explained when he said that Tsu'tei and he would have to…" She was surprised at how tight her chest got at the thought. But that faded, and she focused back on Grace's words. Before she continued, the scientist reached over to pick up the photo, focusing on the image.

"Well, we, uh, woke up. We'd had the visions and everything was positive. But we were terrified of what Eytukan and Mo'at would say. We knew that, traditionally, we should have seen her first for auspicious days and there's a ceremony and everything. We returned, and she instantly knew. An uncanny sense she's got. I was so scared, but she gave a cry of happiness and wrapped me in the tightest hug and said she was so glad she got me as a sister…" Grace felt her heart warm up as she remembered. "Eytukan was pleased as well, and I remember him saying how he always thought his little brother was gay – he was so precise, had to have everything so perfect, from his hair to his clothes."

Nicole gave a snort of laughter, and Grace joined in.

"And he continued to say that because he had to have everything just perfect, he had chosen the perfect mate. And Tzu'khan and Jake, they were so happy, and I remember Tzu'khan just crushing me in a hug and saying, 'You'll be the greatest aunty ever!' And when he heard that, Jake went, 'Wait, does that mean I have to stop calling you 'Mother'?' And then N'deh, he said… He said…" She trailed off, and let out a shaky breath. Nicole realised she was on the verge of tears, and even saw them collecting in her eyes. Her heart sank at the sight.

Grace took a steadying breath, and swallowed the lump she felt in her throat. She looked up to the ceiling, blinking rapidly, as if trying to make the tears seep back in rather than leak out. "He just put his arms around me… Around my middle. And he said, 'You can…'" She cleared her throat again, willing herself to get through it. " 'You can call her 'Mother'… until there is s-someone else… t-to do so.'"

And it was then that the dam burst, and the tears flooded out. Grace wrapped her arms around herself, as if she wanted to become smaller, as she sobbed. Nicole felt her heart just break for her. She wheeled herself over, coming over to pull her into a hug. And there was no resistance, no joking quip against it. That was the Na'vi effect – your mask will be removed, and you will be in your most vulnerable state around them. Nicole hushed her, comforting her like one would a child, as she just sobbed into her shoulder. From the two being wary and suspicious of one another until now. They had really changed.

"After the school…" Grace murmured, trying to regain control, sniffing. "Eytukan and Mo'at didn't want me to leave. They knew it wasn't my fault. But they had no choice. Tzu'khan was a tyrant after… He would have killed me and the other Avatars who were there. And they felt distance between the two species would help. N'deh came to see me all the time. But I couldn't see the rest of my family.

"We must stop at nothing, Nicole. We have to stop this, we have to succeed. Because I don't know what I would do if we failed. When you told me you did it for me, I realised - something tells me that you feel the same."

Chapter Eight

On the twelfth day of Christmas, the author gave to you… an update! I will warn that this will be *the most explicit* chapter thus far. Happy reading and I shall see you next year for the next instalment. Have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Chapter Eight

The waterfall thundered down into the void like a faucet of the gods. The rocks below her feet followed suit, tumbling into the abyss. She peered down the sheer cliff at the world far below, seeing the sea of trees. Easily over twenty kilometres down. *Let's not die today* , Nicole thought with a defiant nod to herself.

She felt her hair, feeling the braids that had been done before she set off. Jake had gotten his mother and several other women that morning to help her do it up in a braided style and pin it back, just to keep the majority out of her face. She felt the bumps in her hair and the wooden beads that finished every tress; it was a style just like Tsu'tei's, and she felt it suited her very well, mainly because Jake had smiled brightly when he saw it.

But he wasn't with her now. The second-in-command had had other duties that morning, so it was actually his practically identifal brother standing with her, and a few other members who she wasn't too well acquainted with. They all smiled and greeted her warmly, though the eldest Tsan'ten boy gave her no such salutation. In fact, he basically ignored her presence. So she did the same to him. It was no loss to her that she had no alliance with him. It just felt strange to her that the one who looked so much like her companion could treat her so differently.

There was one friendly face amongst effective strangers – N'deh had taken it upon himself to go with her. As she stood with him and Grace outside of Hometree, as the other Avatar gave her a hug for

luck, he'd told her he would. She had a feeling he knew that she knew, and with the rare smile he gave her – the only one he'd properly given since she'd seen it in the video – he was very happy for it. "I will make sure you do not fall," he promised, "and this time, be certain you do not." She realised what he was referring to – her encounter with the medusa. He had touched her shoulder for encouragement before they went up the *inikimaya.*

Now they stood on the rocky cliff, walking slowly over the rocks wet from the waterfall. They were in a cliff cavern, on top of the world. Two of the other members, decided to peer over the edge, gasping at the height, until they found something else to gawk at: there was a shriek and the *thwap thwap!* of leathery wings. They reeled backwards just as a massive green and yellow *ikran* pushed its way through the opening. Nicole didn't flinch; rather, she smiled as she recognised the creature, and the rider who jumped off. As the *ikran* perched on the edge of the grotto, Jake dismounted. He flipped his visor, made from transparent insect wings and sealed in a resin, up from his eyes. They smiled at one another; she greeted him by touching her fingers to her forehead, and he flashed her a handsome grin.

"I didn't think you were coming," she said, moving closer to him. She placed a five-fingered hand on the creature's muzzle, and while initially startled, when she murmured, " *Calm, Seze* ," the *ikran* settled.

Jake looked impressed at her way with his animal, and told her, "How could I miss your important day? I finish work early."

She was about to thank him for it, finding herself exuberant he was here, until she heard someone clearing their throat. Instantaneously, the smile was wiped off of her mentor's face when his elder brother said, "Neycole, you go first." Looking at him, Tzu'khan was all smiles as he said it. *You right royal prick.* The other Tsan'ten's and the Moakley amongst them sent him angry looks. Or, in Jake's case, the most murderous look she had ever seen on him. More so than when he had found her amongst the *nantang* , and she wasn't discomfited

to admit, it scared the shit out of her. The way his brow creased, his jaw pulsed. The rigidity of his tail. The pure malevolence that had appeared in his eyes, aimed at his own brother… And upon seeing it, a battle of silent wills ensued amongst them over her head, and she made the smart decision to run into the line of fire.

"All good," she said, giving everyone a smile. N'deh watched her with concern; she nodded to him to reassure him. To Jake, she gave him a look with her eyes to say, 'Really, it's fine', and he blinked in compliance. So she had the last word, she took off her training bow and thrust it into Tzu'khan's hands, giving him a look of, 'Hey you, kiss my ass', before walking forward, flicking her tail sharply towards him, but subtly – she didn't think she could get away with completely flipping the elder prince off.

"I saw that," Jake murmured into her ear, but his voice carried laughter. To her, it came across as he had been wanting to do that but didn't have the balls to do so.

"Someone really needs to put him in his place," she muttered darkly. "I ain't sitting around while you don't."

" *Calm, Neytiri* ," he whispered into her ear, the sound sending a shiver tingling down her spine. Her heart rate sped up as they walked together, pressed against the wet stone wall, towards the *ikran* rookery. She watched her step as the track on which they stepped was wet and thin – it was as if she were walking on a balance beam. But it wasn't a case of just falling to the mats – it was a case of falling to the death. She reached the end of it, finding the beam expanding to a large plateau. And that was where they had been heading.

Hundreds of *ikran* lay and preened along the rocks. The air was filled with their cries and caws. Up close, she could smell the scent of their scales and their rancid breath. Completely wild ones. Nothing like Seze, who was cleaned and looked after by her owner. With an owner, she was tame and composed; these ones were unsettled and

undomesticated. They wouldn't enjoy an Avatar's company, let alone a Na'vi one.

She felt the warmth of Jake's presence beside her, and then his hand on her shoulder. Her heart flared with his touch, and she mentally kicked herself. *What the hell is happening to me?* she wondered, but didn't get to question it as Jake spoke: "Now you choose your *ikran.* This is something you feel inside." As those words came out of his mouth, his four-fingered hand snaked its way across her chest to rest above her heart. It was a movement to emphasise his teaching, but it made her feel even more shivery, and not just from the nerves. "You will have one chance, Neytiri."

She nodded, taking the knowledge in quickly. From the scents to the sounds of the *ikran* , to the rapid thoughts running through her head of what to do, to Jake's hand on her almost bare chest, it was sensory overload. She tried her best to breathe and remain calm. "Right. And he or she will choose me if they try to kill me, right?" Trying to remain calm didn't help; her voice was jittery, and her heart rate shot up more at his confirmation:

"Right."

"Fantastic." She stretched her back, her tail flicking to balance herself. His hand moves away from her chest to slip something into her hand – it was a length of rope, just like the one that had been used to trip her over in what seemed an eternity ago. She ran her hands over the plait, and felt her determination come to her once again. *He taught you well. You remember everything. You will be fine.*

And with that as the driving force pushing her, she walked out onto the plateau.

The *ikran* watched her with penetrating gazes. She felt as if she were the prey and they the predator, yet their actions didn't match – for all the intense staring, the moment she'd move close to one, it would take to the air. It was as if none wanted the position of being

the Avatar's *ikran.* As she watched them fly off, the hundreds dwindling down to just a few on the plateau and more in the air, she had the uncanny sense that Tzu'khan and Tsu'tei were behind this. Impossible, but it was an irrational thought going through her mind. It was just as if the creatures had the mindset to stay as far away from her as possible.

She looked at the man in question; Tzu'khan was laughing his head off with the other young trainers, saying something in rapid fire Na'vi to them. She just knew they were speaking of her. Based on N'deh's face, they were not saying pleasant things. But then she looked to Jake; his face was grim, but the moment he realised she was looking at him, he nodded at her.

And then she heard a shrill cry. She looked back, and found herself staring into the yellow eyes of a blue and green *ikran.* It gave a loud, chilling call, shifting its weight as it sat from side to side. She tilted her head at it, and bared her teeth with a hiss. It responded with another ear-splitting shriek. A smirk ran across her features. "Let's dance," she said to it.

The animal and the individual squared off, seeing who would strike first. Jake had told her to be careful if it struck first – with a long neck and sharp black teeth that curved downward, easily seven centimetres in length, it would be a painful lesson. But she was nimble, and as the menacing mouth came toward her, she swept to the side and pushed her legs off the ground with a cry, launching up and grabbing it around the neck.

Ja'kanhe's heart was in his mouth as he watched Neytiri jump into the air. He was settled only momentarily as she landed right on its neck, but his own throat tightened as he watched her grapple with it. *Eywa, help her. Please, please help her* , he prayed in his head. His nails dug into his palms, so hard he felt he may draw blood. And it only increased as he heard his brother laugh: " *That slut is going to die!* "

" *She'll be fine* ," Ja'kanhe growled in response. He wasn't sure if he said it to silence Tzu'khan or to silence his own fears. But those fears only got louder as he continued to watch her struggle. The *ikran* was battling for its freedom for all it was worth. It swayed this way and that, jumped up and down, and was only short of rolling onto its back and knocking her off. From there, it would be a simple lunge at her exposed neck or face…

" *Be brave, Neycole! Be brave, oh noble Sky Person!* " the other members mockingly chanted while he yelled at her, "Make the bond!"

" *Honestly little brother, what good would she serve in the clan anyway?"* Tzu'khan asked, earning a chortle from the other members. " *Unless, you know, you were just hoping for a little female company? Isn't that the point of your little charade as her teacher? Wonder what Tsu'tei will say to a little competition.* "

The hoots of laughter from the other members was too much. In his rage, he whirled around to his brother and roared, " *Enough! You don't understand it! When I met her, do you know what happened? Atorkirina, more than I have ever seen in my life, landed upon her. Hundreds of them. They lighted her in a glow. I told Mother, and she was shocked. That has not happened for many years, before our lifetime, and never has that happened for a Sky Person, and by the expression on your own face, I know that is true."* Tzu'khan's smirk had been wiped off, and his ears had pricked up; he was listening. " *So she spoke to Our Mother, and was told that Neytiri's arrival would be the best event in centuries. For what, I do not know, but I'm keen to find out.* " He was about to turn back to focus on Neytiri when he added: " *And as for your comment on my so-called 'charade', I was told to keep an eye on her. You see, unlike you, I obey my duties.* "

An unsettled hush waved over the other members. None of them had known that – it had been a secret between his parents and him. They hadn't even deigned to tell their elder son. Why would they? He hadn't been around and it wasn't a subject they were inclined to bring up. He wasn't a necessary element to the family any longer. Tzu'khan opened his mouth, and then closed it. His expression was

indecipherable. He was so astounded he didn't even bring up the passive-aggressive comment his younger brother had thrown on at the end. Ja'kanhe brushed himself off and focused back on his student, regretting missing even a second of her task.

But he realised in relief that she had gotten closer. She had pulled the creature's head under her arm, and secured the twine around its snapping mouth. Finding itself stuck, the *ikran* could barely move, and Neytiri flipped herself off the back of its neck, her legs still tucking it underneath her. And then, in a fluid motion that made him so proud, she threw her queue into her hands and grabbed the antennae, a cry sounding from her and the animal as they were connected. And then the *ikran* lay still.

Nicole was exhausted and sore from being thrashed around with the animal, but a smile came on her face as she let the creature sit up. It was a male. It was as if immediately from the bond, he had turned friendly and calm. She smiled and stroked its face, hearing it coo instead of snarl from her touch. And the sudden change in its nature after it got to know her reminded her of someone. "How much do you think Jake will kill me if I name you after him?"

"You can think of better name." She turned around to see him running up to her and her new companion. Jake's face was as bright as the midday sun. He came to squeeze her shoulder in a congratulations, before he gave her a gentle push towards the animal. "First flight seals the bond! Go, you must go!"

She didn't get much of a choice as he pressed her to sit upon the *ikran's* back, and then helped to the edge and all but pushed the duo off it.

Nicole gave an almighty yell as the *ikran* and her plummeted. It was as if through its taming it had forgotten how to fly. Its wings refused to flap, the two of them spiralling down from the cliff, and the end result would not be pleasant. There was a cacophony of thoughts ringing through her mind – her own and the creature's, which absolutely freaked her out. Whilst she had ridden a *pa'li* and heard

its thoughts, this was something else. *Ikrans* were smarter, therefore having far more ideas running through their brains. And with all the screeching and the wind whipping past her face and the fact that the trees were coming closer and closer to spell their doom, she yelled out, "Oh for fuck's sakes, just shut up and fly straight!"

He did. The *ikran* flew easily, gliding upwards until he levelled out, moving slowly through the air. The thoughts quietened and smoothed out; they were not completely gone, but now she herself could think. And now she could see.

It was a breathtaking view. There was something different about seeing the aerial view of Pandora from an *ikran's* back as compared to a helicopter. With the open air above her, the scents not masked by the smell of petroleum, it was just something else. She was… flying. She herself was guiding this animal beneath her to fly. She could feel the double wings moving up and down, working in tandem to keep them elevated. As they soared, she couldn't help but think that the Na'vi gave the humans a misnomer – they weren't the Sky People, the 'masters' of the sky. The Na'vi were. With the incredible feeling of unstoppable air rushing past her face, she could hardly believe what she felt. She felt weightless. She felt… free.

There was a cry and she looked over. A wide smile came on her face as she spied Seze, and then on her back, Jake. He gave her a wave and an approving look, before banking away. *Follow them* , she thought to her *ikran,* and he obeyed.

She fell into flight beside Jake. She copied the way he was sitting on his ikran – his knees up, hunched over its back, his arm on its neck for support, but he had it easier since his had a type of saddle. She was riding bare back, so she rested her feet on the creature's shoulder blades for now, getting more comfortable. "You fly well!" he called out to her, his words almost pulled away by the wind, but her strong ears just caught it.

"You're better!"

He then did something extremely human and something she never thought he would do – he shrugged. "I have experience. You do well for first time!" He looked her up and down. "But, you do well at everything in the end."

She could only bask in his praise. She didn't know what to say in return to thank him. Compliments were not her strong suit. But her chance was snatched away from her, as she heard another call, and turned her head to see another *ikran* coming towards them. Initially she thought it was one of the other apprentices, but as the rider came close, she realised it was N'deh. The two youngsters waved at him, and he did the same as he flew beside her. "I tell Grace you are safe, yes? You all fine?" he called out to Nicole.

"She better than fine – she perfect!" Jake confirmed before she could reply, and nephew and uncle both cheered her on.

And she could only look at Jake as he watched her, his face full of pride. They both watched one another, just lost in each other's eyes. She wasn't even paying attention to the vista any longer. How could she, when the most wonderful part of it was right beside her?

• • •

Some of the village children were squealing with delight when the trio showed up that evening. Before the evening meal, Grace had fifteen of them sitting in a circle at the back of Hometree, whilst she chased a young boy around the perimeter. She reached her longer arm out to touch his shoulder, and then sat down, breathless, as he began to walk the circle by himself. He touched the other children's heads as he went by, saying, ' *Riti, riti, riti…* '

"Oh I get it!" Nicole chortled as they came up close to Grace. "It's 'Duck, Duck, Goose'!"

"Astute observation," Grace agreed with a mischievous grin. "Though really, over here it's ' *Riti* , *Riti* – '"

" *Ikran!* " called the young boy again as he touched the older Avatar's leg so she would have to chase him again. But N'deh grabbed her around the middle and called to the young boy, "Quick! Sit in her spot before she run!" Grace just laughed and shook her head at her mate as the child went to sit where she had been several moments before. It was a good thing too, as now she would be able to speak to them. Gesturing to the children to keep on playing without her, she walked with them. N'deh kept his tail touching with hers, and she would have smiled more at it – they weren't hiding it around Nicole anymore – if it weren't for the fact that this was still a potentially deceitful situation.

You haven't told him , was all she could think. From the way Ja'kanhe smiled, with not a trace of concern or strain, she knew the answer without having to ask. And she hadn't told N'deh either. How did she even begin? She knew she would have to. It would be better coming from her than anyone else.

"You did not ask how Nicole go today," Ja'kanhe said, breaking the ice that had begun to freeze as they walked in the warm evening air. He nudged his student with his arm, a smile that showed all his incisors appearing. "She do very well."

"Oh yes, your first flight!" Grace said with a smile, doing her best to be nonchalant though feeling she was failing miserably. Nicole had been right about her not having an acting ability. And from the way N'deh's tail entwined with hers, and he looked at her with some confusion, she was obviously giving off a vibe that she had been trying to suppress. So she looked at the young woman, and tilted her head, "Well why don't you tell me all about it and we shall let you two go on ahead? We shall see you at dinner." Securing her hand around Nicole's wrist, she dragged her away from the Tsan'ten's, who looked positively bewildered.

"We cannot keep putting this off," Grace muttered quietly to her. Away from the keen ears of the rest of the clan, as they walked towards the river where the waterfall would mask even more of their words, "We have to tell them tonight."

Nicole shook the hand off and sighed, scratching her head as if that movement alone would solve everything. "I know," she said. "We do."

"We've lost two days already. That's two days more that RDA has the jump on us. We just… we gotta do it, Nicole. No ifs, no buts – tonight."

"Fine, fine!" Nicole hissed, earning a raised eyebrow in response. Her tail flicked sharply. "I'm sorry, I don't think there is a manual on exactly how to break this kind of news."

"I think if we both agree to tell them in unison tonight this will help – we will be forced to tell because if one knows, how awful would it get if the other didn't?"

Yeah but I'm not married to Jake! she wanted to retort, but she knew it wouldn't get her far. That was the pettiest statement if she ever heard one. It wouldn't solve their issue and it sure as hell wouldn't stop Grace. From the steeled determination in her eyes, she knew what would happen. She slowly nodded, swallowing. "Tonight. After dinner, before bed."

Grace breathed out, closing her eyes as she contemplated that. "Thank you," she said finally. The two looked at one another, and they knew they were both thinking the same thing – this was it. This was the deciding factor. And they were both scared. If it went badly, it would constitute exile, and the scientist knew that this was not a case where Eytukan and Mo'at would be remorseful of letting her go. N'deh... what would he do in this situation? Would it be a betrayal? Would it just be the straw that broke the *pa'li's* back? But if it went well… Well that was all they could pray for. That was the only hope that kept them going. That if this worked, if they listened, they could save thousands. Their family. There was no dramatic music, no thunderclap overhead, not even *atokirina* for Nicole to know that this was it. That this was going to work. All they knew was that they had to try. And if they failed, and were forced to return to their meagre existence outside of Eden, the consolation would be that they tried.

"Good luck, Nicole."

"Good luck, Grace."

• • •

The light of the sunset spilled across the inlet of Hometree where Ja'kanhe stood, just thinking. He tapped the wooden bowl of tea in his fingers. Try as he might, he couldn't squash the feeling of pride he had had when he saw Neytiri flying. The memory brought a warm feeling to his stomach, yet he couldn't help but wonder if it was only the memory.

" *So how did it go?* " He turned to see his mother smiling at him from the entrance. He was at first taken aback by what she wore – a soft robe made of gossamer silver thread that hung over her shoulders. She only wore that for extremely special occasions. In fact, the last time he had seen it was when Tsu'tei was made a ward of the clan just five seasons before. When she noticed his stare, she said, " *I thought I'd bring this back out. Neycole will have the ceremony tomorrow.* "

" *Right, right, of course* ," he murmured, though unable to now stop the worry seeping in. The happiness he had felt only moments before dissipated. He beckoned her inside with his tail, and she came to perch herself on a log that had been brought in for such a purpose. She smiled up at him. Out of respect, he passed her the bowl of tea and she took a few sips, keeping it in her own hands whilst he continued to speak. " *I just haven't seen you wear that in years. I thought you were saving it.* "

" *For what?* " He didn't respond; he just passed his eyes over her and looked down at his bowl. He heard her give a wistful sigh. He knew that trick – she had come to speak of something. The way she did it was always done in such a way to get the person's attention she wanted without them even knowing she had done it. " *So, whilst I was talking with Our Mother on auspicious dates, She told me of one coming up –* "

" *There it is.* "

She looked perplexed. She tilted her head to the side and asked, " *What is?* "

" *That is why you're wearing it. Because I know that you told me you would wear that on your son's respective wedding days.* "

A frown had now settled on her face when he looked back at her. " *Where is this attitude coming from?* " she asked.

He sighed, closing his eyes momentarily before focusing on her face. " *I'm not giving you attitude. I'm not trying to. I just don't entirely relish the idea of this happening.* "

" *You knew this day was coming.* "

" *So when is it then? It's obviously been decided – "*

" *Tomorrow.* "

He felt he had just been given the date of his execution. " *Oh* ," he breathed out shakily. He could have sworn he heard his own heart beating in his chest. *Tomorrow… How can I be with her tomorrow? For life? After tomorrow, that's it. I'll never see Neytiri again.* And at the thought of her, with her smiling face, her cheerful persona, her wicked jokes, her resilience and her wit… He had heard of people speaking of how they could feel when their heart was sick. He now understood it.

His ears went back as he contemplated exactly what was to happen. Tsu'tei. And him. For life. He could hardly tolerate speaking to her for more than the duration of breakfast. Now he would have to share every waking moment with her. This day was inevitable, but a small part of him believed that maybe – by some divine intervention – it wouldn't happen. He swallowed and sighed. " *Mother, did you ever… were you ever scared of marrying Father?* "

" *How could I ever be scared of that? It was the best thing to ever happen to me. As well as you and your brother being born.* "

" *But I mean… Mother it's different for me. You and Father grew up together. Tsu'tei and I… I mean we –* "

" *Tsu'tei will be a fine mate for you. She's intelligent and insightful and beautiful. Isn't that what you'd want?* "

But she doesn't hold a flame to… Oh how he wanted to say it. He wished he could. But it was better they were locked away in the safety of his own mind, where they would stay forever more. Tomorrow, he would be bound with Tsu'tei, and Neytiri would be chosen within moments by another man of the clan. He had known that fact for a long time. And he was shocked by how disjointed, how unpleasant he felt as he realised that he would have to watch her go through the ceremony with someone else. The idea was hitting him harder than ever. He had thought about his student for a while, but never with such power. In fact he was certain that this was fairly sudden. Was it just the fright of having to mate Tsu'tei? Was it just the horrendous idea that the past almost moon would cease to exist once it happened? He knew it was true. Tsu'tei wouldn't want anything to do with her, or rather, she wouldn't want her mate to have anything to do with her.

" *Tsu'tei has always treated you with kindness* ," his mother pointed out.

" *But Mother I don't want kindness!* "

She regarded him carefully for what seemed like an eternity, and he knew well he wouldn't be able to drop his gaze. " *Really? I thought we all wanted kindness. Unless you're asking for something more, and that is something in which you are no position to ask.* " She was right, of course, and to confirm the argument: " *This is the life of a prince, Ja'kanhe. This is the life of a leader. You do what is best for the clan. Not yourself.*

" *You're eighteen, Ja'kanhe,* " she went on. " *Neither you nor I can know your destiny. Only Our Mother can. But she may never explicitly tell you! Destiny isn't always clear like night that symbolises the end of a day. Sometimes it's nothing more than going through life day by day.* "

" *But Mother, how cruel!* "

" *Yes, it is cruel,* " she said, " *But none of us can escape destiny* ."

" *Mother, I cannot explain this as eloquently as you speak,* " he began slowly, looking directly at her and praying his words didn't fail him. " *But there… there are so many things that I wish I could do, could have done –* "

" *And you fear that once you and Tsu'tei are together, they can never be? Really Ja'kanhe, I expected more from you.* " His ears dropped and he glanced back at the floor. " *Young people hope all sorts of foolish things. But hopes are like firing arrows. You fire one and then have to chase after it to retrieve it back. Young people fire out too many. An older person doing so would look silly running after so many when they should know by then that only one can do the trick.* "

He bit his lip, breathing out slowly and trying to stop the dread that was clawing at his belly now. " *But Mother, you don't understand. Your own feelings. I mean, have you ever wanted something else and realised…?* " He trailed off as he realised his attempts were futile. It was all he could do but just blink and agree. There was silence between them, and she made the decision that the conversation was over. She stood up to go, and he looked up at her with the idea to make one last plea, but glancing at her face, he thought better of it. He couldn't say what she was thinking, but her jaw was tight, her mouth in a taught line as if from the strain. And then she let out a breath, and walked out, her final expression one he took to be of bitterness.

All at once he felt as if his home were burning down around him. A Na'vi might pride themselves on the way they dress and the items they may have made, but with the crackle of fire they quickly decide what matters most. And as Ja'kanhe struggled to think of what would matter to him after Tsu'tei became a Tsan'ten… he was sad to say he failed. He would still have his family. He would still have his clan. Yet with all those people around him, he knew that he was preparing himself for a very lonely existence. He had seen for years the toll of leadership on his parents – his father had aged faster than he should and his mother often suffered from migraines from the strain. But they had each other. They loved one another. They'd die for one another. And what terrified him was the person he would jump for wasn't to be in his life altogether.

"Hey, bad time?" *Her.* Instantly all the bad thoughts were practically decimated as she came in. Her golden orbs watched him as she came forward, her hands folded across her body. "I just came in to – holy shit, are you okay? Jake you look… dreadful."

"Thank you," he muttered, moving to sit on the place his mother had vacated. He couldn't watch her. Half of him wanted her to leave and another half wanted her to just stay with him. She made the choice as he heard the pattering of her footsteps, and then she was beside him, kneeling and looking up to him. Her soft fingers brushed under his jaw in concern, and he didn't even flinch as he felt the extra extremity.

"I'm thinking this is a bad time," she said finally. Apparently as he hadn't spoken, she took it as her cue to leave, and he was instantly regretful. "I can come back – "

"No!" He swallowed, realising how forceful he sounded; the way her eyes widened, it had come off more commanding than he had intended. "I am sorry. Just… yes, bad time. But if you do not mind, sit with me?"

She settled down on her haunches, looking up at him. She exhaled loudly and shook her head. "Well I don't know what happened, but

you look like you're in dire need of a drink," she said, obviously meaning to make him laugh, but when no sound came, she actually sounded desperate as she asked, "My Jake, you're worrying me. What's going on?" And to make matters worse, she touched his knee in her concern.

How will you take it? he wondered. *What will you say? Is it so that what I am imagining is just that – imagination? I suppose only one way to find out.*

"Mother came to tell me," he murmured, "that tomorrow I will be mating Tsu'tei."

Of all the possible reactions, the one he had not expected was laughter, but that was what he received. Neytiri gave a choking laugh. "Well that's crazy!" she exclaimed, her voice going up an octave. "How can it be? We're already having the ceremony for the new members of the clan, you can't have a mating ceremony on the same day – there won't be enough time!"

As she looked at him, she felt a sudden scratchiness in her throat. There was no denial, no joking about it. *Oh my God…* She wondered if for a moment she forgot how to breathe. She wiped her lip with her thumb just for something to do as she tried to process that. "No… How could that be? You had no warning. And… C'mon, I've seen these mating ceremonies, they take days to prepare…!"

One look at Jake told her that she was not the only one thinking it. "Eywa said so, so it will be done."

Everything flew out of her mind as he said that. Her original task was forgotten. The only thoughts running through her was how she'd never get to speak to Jake again. Ever. Tsu'tei would make sure of that. He would be placed on the pedestal of leadership, too high for her, a warrior, to reach. "Jake, I… Jesus Christ," she breathed out, her ears going down. "I'm… I'm so sorry."

He looked at her, and sighed. Hesitatingly, he reached out to caress her cheek with his hand momentarily, just feeling her skin. He'd never feel it again. "I will miss being your teacher," he murmured. A whimsical smile came over him. "I should have taken longer to teach. Then we would not have to say goodbye, so soon."

She felt that lump in her throat form. *Dammit, get yourself under control,* she thought angrily. The Na'vi Effect. She could only look at him, terrified that if she spoke, her voice would break. *This is such medieval bullshit,* was all she could think. Back on Earth, if they were there, he could easily run from it. Just say no. But there was no choice here. She cleared her throat, forcing a smile for him as she did her best to say what she wanted to. " *Not 'goodbye',* " she began in his language, " *'See you later'."*

A wide smile came onto his face, but his eyes seemed to hold a dark sadness. His thumb brushed over her smooth cheek, tracing one of the stripes with it. "That's my girl," he whispered as his arms encircled her for a hug. He needed one. Especially from her. His friend, his companion, his student, his life, his… nothing. Nothing. She would be Nothing.

She hugged him back, clinging onto him as if he were the only thing keeping her in this body. "You will be a wonderful leader," she murmured into his ear.

"If that so, keep training. I need my warriors to be the best."

She nodded to stop herself from crying. Of the month she'd been on Pandora, the effect it had had on her… She had never felt so alive, yet so dead, at the same time. He leaving her would be like the air being pulled from her lungs. She was already feeling the effects.

He pulled away to look deep into her eyes, willing the words to come, but they weren't. Because as he looked into her eyes, he saw something that made his heart pound – that fondness that was always present wasn't simply friendly. He saw love. It was the look of love he saw there.

And she saw it in his. It was there. She had been in love once or twice, and every time, a love was different. This was the most different love she'd ever experienced.

But it was also the most powerful.

They both stood up at the same time, so in sync they were. He moved closer to her, their bodies practically touching. The room was still, full of shyness and promise. She couldn't hear the chirp of birds, the resonances of the rainforest. She could only hear his breathing, perhaps even his heart, beating for her. His hand moved from her arm slowly, coming to rest on the side of her neck. It was as if he were testing the water. "I do not want to marry Tsu'tei," he whispered softly.

She shook her head gently, her heart beating so fast it was a wonder it didn't explode. "I do not want you to marry her, either."

Between the two of them, smiles crossed their faces. They both wanted the same thing. It was a case now of, 'What happens now?' What was to happen now that they both knew how the other felt? Were they to ignore it? Think of what could have been and go to sleep separately for the rest of their lives, just wrapped in the memory of that fleeting moment? It would have been the smart thing to do, but as Tsu'tei herself had said, intelligence was not Neytiri's finer quality. And for Jake, it was smarter to pursue happiness.

Instinctively, they both leaned in, and kissed.

And to her, it felt perfect; soft yet firm, warm, not too wet. She'd never felt a kiss so wonderful in her life. Never breaking their touch, they settled back down onto the floor. His arms enfolded her once more, and he shifted their position so that she found herself sitting on his lap. To her, she wasn't sure who was leading this – they both responded to one another with the same energy, the same eagerness. But it was his hands that first began to roam over her body, making her gasp. Upon hearing it, he moved his kisses down to her throat, murmuring huskily, "No?"

She closed her eyes, feeling his hands explore over her. Every touch sent tingles and fire through her body, making her gasp and jolt. He ran his fingers along her sides, over her legs, his lips teasing her neck. It felt very uneven that he did so much for her whilst she did little for him, so she deftly grabbed his wrists, and pinned them down to the floor.

He was shocked by the sudden dominance from her, but he didn't object to it as she now nuzzled his neck, pushing him back against the wall. Her tail flicked over his loin cloth, and she was glad to see the situation had flipped in her favour as she heard the sharp intake of breath from him. "Mmm, yes," she purred, a smirk lighting her face as she ran her teeth along his shoulder, feeling him shiver at her touch.

And she seemed to know every spot, every place that would elicit some groan from him. He suddenly found himself wondering something, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to know the answer. "Have you… done this before?"

It was a question to stop her hands, which had been rubbing his hip. She pulled away to look at him, her eyes right into his. "A few times," she admitted. Then her ears perked up as realisation dawned on her. "Wait… have you…?"

His silence gave her the answer she expected, but she was still blindsided. She slowly nodded. "Wow, okay. Well um, I can say one thing – it isn't obvious at all."

He shot her a grin. "Is that so?" he asked, his arms pulling her body to press against his again. He tangled their tails, the two of them entwining around one another. She smiled and nodded. "I will take that as compliment."

"Absolutely," she breathed. It was like something out of a film with the way they moved together. It was something she had never experienced before. They just responded to one another's movements in a way that seemed like it had been scripted. But

unbeknownst to them, in different ways, they both got a taste of freedom. All his life, he'd been made to do things only a certain way, been propped up and told exactly what to do. Right now it was as if all that had fallen away. It was as if for the first time in his life, he was making a choice in something, and as she writhed and whimpered at his touch, he thought it was the best decision for the first decision he'd ever made. And for her, the release was more recent. All the stress, the worry, the terror that had consumed her just seemed to melt away as he ran his hands between her thighs, and she was amazed with how quickly her body answered. She wasn't sure if this was a build up from years without sexual contact, or if it simply was because it was Jake. As she looked at him, as she guided his hand to touch her, directing in how to do it, she got her solution.

He felt her hand guide his own now. She was wet and warm, and as he continued, the feeling only increased. All of a sudden, she got off of his lap. Wrapping an arm around his neck, she lowered them both down to the cool floor, he on top of her. Her free hand skilfully undid his loin cloth, and then helped him undo her own clothing. And he could only marvel at her absolute beauty. She rivalled any and easily all the women in the clan. Perhaps he'd go so far as to say any clan. Her human genes had kicked in to give her a voluptuousness about her unfounded within the Na'vi, and his eyes just couldn't stop staring at the curves of her body, her fuller breasts.

"What?" she murmured, suddenly feeling self-conscious. She began to sit up, but he just pressed his forehead against her own and whispered, "You are so beautiful."

A smile slowly spread across her face. "Is that so?"

He nodded, his tail flicking as he smiled in return. Their lips found one another again. The headiness of the moment had ebbed, and now they just took it slow. She had never been loved like this before. Anyone she had been with had just been keen to go fast and hard. This was different, and she had to admit she liked the contrast. She let her hand sneak down again to rub him, feeling him quiver. One of his hands roamed over her breasts, while the other kept between her

legs. He won the battle as she gave up on touching him, the pleasure just too much. At first her gasps were shallow and quiet, but they grew deeper and louder, and she could only pray that no one was around to hear it. Surely, by now, someone would have? There was no door. But then she realised – everyone was at dinner now. They were enjoying something else.

The synchronicity of timing was still perfect, as she felt him press his hips to her own at the same time she raised her legs and curled them around his back to pull him close. What she hadn't been completely prepared for was sudden flash of pain. She gave a groan, and he immediately pulled back to look at her worriedly, but she shook her head and brought him back down for a kiss. Altogether, the pain was forgotten by her as they just fell into one another. Their bodies fit together like pieces of a puzzle. He couldn't believe how right this felt. How wonderful she felt around him. She kissed him deeply to muffle their moans, his nails dug into her skin, and their tails constricted around together as he surged into her. They were both breathless and flushed, spent. The heat and scent of the moment still hung palpably in the air.

He pulled away from her, rolling off to lie beside her. Catching their breath, they just stared at each other. Neytiri smiled at him; he smiled back. They both pressed their lips softly together, and she stroked his face with the back of her hand. As they cooled down, they shifted their position so her head was on his chest. He kissed her hair, murmuring her name like a prayer: "Neytiri, Neytiri, Neytiri…"

Her nose twitched as a metallic scent hit her nose. In between her legs hurt, and as she sat up, she realised why. "Hmm, I suppose you did take my virginity," she chuckled, seeing some blood on her legs. Of course, this body would be.

He seemed very pleased for it. He kissed her cheek, and she kissed his forehead, the two of them still not satisfied. They just wanted to be so much closer to one another. His ears pricked up as he realised there was a way, but… He hesitated. Tomorrow would still dawn.

What was going to happen would happen. *Where does that leave us?* he wondered. Was this just what it was?

She brushed his bare arm absently with her fingertips. "Jake, you know my real body is far away from here, sleeping."

His fingers brushed over her lips, and he shook his head. "You are real," he murmured. He paused for a moment, before continuing. "When I first met you, I was angry. Angry at... the situation. I missed Grace. I missed the few who were good. When I saw you, I fear you were not." He kissed her lips. "You were. Are. The best of them all. Eywa Herself said so." He glanced at her, wondering how she would take that admission. "Neytiri?" he questioned, seeing the disturbance on her features.

She was chewing on her lip, sighing. She rolled onto her side. *Shit, you should have done this before anything* , she thought. *What the hell are you doing Neytiri?* And that would be how she would think for a long time to come. She could say how the moment just flowed into what they did. It had been unstoppable. But it didn't change the fact that what had happened, happened, and what she was about to say, she had to. She had to.

She swallowed, looking at her mentor, leader, friend… She wanted to tack on another title but she didn't know if she could. For all she knew he would whip away the first three without a moment's hesitation. He would erase her from his memory. But no matter what, she would never forget him. He would be locked in her memory forever more. Perhaps that made the idea more painful, that she would never be able to let him - or his people - go. But she had to do this, because if she didn't, there was no chance for them whatsoever. If she did this, they might buy some time.

For strength she could only reach out to touch his face, sighing. "My Jake," she began, before giving him a smile. "Do you trust me?"

"With all my heart, Neytiri."

Please keep it that way . She reached down to entwine her five fingers with his four, something that was strange, but not entirely unpleasant. She breathed out. "You're a leader," she began. "You're about to become leader," she corrected herself, "and in that you will protect your clan. Your people. You'd do anything to keep them happy and prosperous, yes?"

"Yes."

She glanced down, steadying her breath. "Unfortunately, the same goes for our human leaders." When he looked confused, she nodded. "I used the word right. You see, you believe in balance in the world. Harmony. You build around your world. Our kind, they make the world build around them. And they stop at nothing.

"The Avatar was a project to build trust with your kind. Build relationships. So that we could deliver a message and you would believe it. Unfortunately the relationship got fucked up in the past. Consider this me trying to prevent this from happening again…"

He pulled away from her, eyeing her as if she were speaking in a third language he didn't know. She felt the same way about the words coming from her mouth – it was as if Grace were saying this at times. Or perhaps it was some strength of will that came through. Either way, he didn't understand it as he took her shoulders in his hands. He sought answers in her face but turned up nothing. "What are you saying, Neytiri?"

Chapter Nine

Here is the next chapter. Sorry it took so long, but I've received fantastic news – as of August, I will no longer call Australia my home. I will be moving to New York City to study there. Hopefully the story will be finished before then as I have a lot of work to do! Thank you again for all your lovely reviews – please do keep them coming. It's such a joy to read them and it really encourages me to continue with this.

Chapter Nine

Mo'at was unsettled all throughout the meal, and it was drawing the attention of her mate who kept an eye on her. She refused the food proffered to her, instead sitting by the fire with her family and looking tormented. Her tail was straight as an arrow sometimes, and then moving with anxious riffles. It earned a soft murmuring from Eytukan, " *Keep that up and our people will start to stress."*

" *I can't help it* ," she countered, keeping her eyes on the fire in front of her. " *I just… I don't know. I cannot let go of the feeling that something is wrong.* "

His eyes held a quiet alarm. She knew that just by her saying it, he would immediately worry for her. He always trusted her judgement, as *tsahíks* always had a good sense. Sometimes if she felt it, he would notice yet she wouldn't say what it was, keeping quiet and looking straight ahead. The Na'vi didn't lie – if something wasn't to be spoken about, it wasn't, but he would keep pestering her until she gave in and told him. Thus, she found it was simply easier to tell him immediately.

One family member was missing. These days she wasn't fussed if Ja'kanhe didn't join them for dinner; he often ate with Neycole on the sidelines out of respect for the family. But as she cast her eyes around the clan, chanting each name of every member in her head,

she noticed he wasn't there at all. She chewed on her lip, feeling her heart growing heavy with regret. Her words had been callous towards him, she knew. But he had to know where his duty lay. She didn't know whether to be furious or frustrated with him, yet the emotion winning was simply fear. She feared she had been too harsh with him. He had always been a sensitive and kind one. He took after her whilst Tzu'khan used to take after his father, who had a more proactive stance. Perhaps he was avoiding dinner. Avoiding his family. Avoiding Tsu'tei, who sat beside her, all smiles for once. She was chattering merrily with Tzu'khan, joking with him about how he was going to gain a sister tomorrow, and was so delighted she barely noticed he wasn't paying her more than the absolute necessary amount of attention.

Mo'at slowly counted again, mouthing the names of the members. *Where's N'deh?* The thought hit her and she wondered why she hadn't noticed that immediately. Come to think of it, where was Grace? How had she not noticed that before? They were always together, and they always sat with the family. But the worst part was when she realised… "Where is Neycole?" she asked her mate quietly, distress coming from her voice. Eytukan cast his keen eyes around the area, as if to prove her wrong when he spotted her, but from the way the light in them dimmed, she realised that she had been right.

" *Mother!* " Even over the din, her head snapped up when she heard Ja'kanhe's voice. She was so focused on him that she could hear him as clearly as if he were standing right next to her. But he wasn't; rather, he was standing on the outskirts of the section, behind the group of healers who were chattering animatedly. She was flushed with relief momentarily, until she saw Neycole appear beside him from the shadows. He beckoned her over with his hand; she flicked her tail on the ground and mouthed, 'No, you come here.' And to her utmost shock and horror, he actually looked at the Avatar, who shook her head, and then he beckoned her again. *Since when do you take orders from her instead of your own mother?* she couldn't help but think, feeling absolutely scandalised. Not to mention hurt. Her eyes

narrowed shrewdly, but she excused herself from the group and stood. Carefully moving over the seated clan, minding her way and trying not to step on tails, she came to stand beside the duo.

"Yes?" she asked in English, not even attempting to hide the irritation that came from her mouth.

"I need to speak with you," Neycole said to her, causing the *tsahík* to arch an eye ridge. Already, she did not like where this was going. Even upon seeing her son was safe, she still could not shake the feeling something was direly wrong. The feeling was so powerful it had settled into her bones.

"Concerning what?"

There was a moment of hesitation. She didn't like the look of uncertainty in the young girl's eyes. And what was the scent coming off of them? There was strange salty and metallic aroma coming from their skin, especially the Avatar; she made a point of not to wriggle her nose in case it offended in some way.

Finally, Neycole spoke again. "I request a council meeting with you, Mo'at, daughter of Kaja. And with your mate, Eytukan, son of Taron, his brother N'deh, and your sons, Tzu'khan and Ja'kanhe of Omaticayan birth."

If you had said that in Na'vi, I would have been impressed, Mo'at couldn't help but think. She ran her tongue over her teeth and then glanced back towards the family group. Eytukan's eyes hadn't left her, and the moment she turned, he stood up and came over. She glanced to their eldest, and her mate touched their son's shoulder, interrupting Tsu'tei and getting him to follow. She glanced back. "I do not know where N'deh is."

"That's okay," Neycole replied, before clearing her throat and repeating, "I mean, that is quite alright. I will follow up with them in due course."

She couldn't help but realise that the Avatar had missed out a new family member. She turned to Ja'kanhe and said in Na'vi, " *You should invite Tsu'tei.* "

She was not prepared for the cutting response: " *No.* "

" *Ja'kanhe, she is to be your wife.* "

" *Not until sunrise.* " Her mouth opened to respond, but then she closed it. His defiance was something that unsettled her. Never had he gone against his parents. *Please don't turn into your brother, please. Eywa don't let him do that, too.*

" *Since when do you speak to me like that?* " she asked lowly, cautious of how close the rest of the clan was. Already she could feel eyes starting to turn towards them. There were some things they didn't need to hear. But he was saved from answering as she felt her mate's hand on her shoulder, and Tzu'khan asking, "What is happening?"

Neycole glanced between all of them, with a gaze she couldn't quite place for meaning. "I must speak with all of you."

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This is it. This is the moment to say goodbye. Because after this is through, they won't want anything to do with you.

She was a bundle of nerves as the hierarchy followed her upstairs. She knew the leaders had important meetings in the council room, but she didn't want to ask if they could go there. Besides, she felt the nagging feeling in the back of her head to turn towards one of the far rooms. It was a section saved for drying food she realised, as she saw woven trays carrying grains and other fodder. She was about to turn back and find another, when she realised that her instinctive feeling was because there were two other people there. N'deh and Grace sat in the far corner. *Good, I won't have to go looking for you,* she thought, feeling glad initially they were there. But then she

noticed their positions – N'deh was leaning against the wall, his jaw clenched, while the scientist sat easily three feet from him, her chin in her hands. One look at her, and Neytiri knew that she had been crying. The streak marks down her cheeks left little to the imagination.

"Well, this saves me going to find you," she said, beckoning the others inside just as N'deh said, "Neycole, please, not now."

She felt a presence beside her, and looked up, surprised to see how close Eytukan was to her. He said something in Na'vi, which she knew that he had asked his brother what was wrong. N'deh didn't respond.

Come on, Neytiri – buck up. "Everyone, can we please sit?" she asked, ignoring N'deh's request. She moved over to sit beside Grace, putting her on her right, sitting so close to her that their knees touched. Her boss looked up at her, a pool of tears in her eyes. *It'll be all right. I'm going to make everything better, I promise,* she thought in her head, hoping that somehow it would be conveyed to her, maybe through the look in her eyes. From the most minimal nod in reply, she could guess it had. She looked back to the group, who had sat down in a circle around her. They all watched her with such an intensity it was a wonder she didn't melt into a puddle before them.

She glanced over to Ja'kanhe, sitting on her left, who looked back at her. He closed his eyes once and then opened them. She mimicked him, before casting her eyes back. " *I have something to say* ," she began slowly and clearly, " *to all of you.* " She sighed, softly adding, "And the words are like knives in my heart…"

Eytukan finished the impending silence. " *You may speak, Neycole.* "

She nodded, looking at the *olo'eyktan* apologetically. "I must do this in English, I am sorry. I cannot afford an error." He blinked once. She looked around all of them, not even knowing where to begin. "I came to you with a mission. I came to you to deliver a message."

"You did not come to us," Mo'at began, her eyes narrowing, "we found you."

"Well, yes," she conceded, "but there was always a plan for me to come to you." When the *tsahík* looked confused, "Look, there was a whole plan for me to come and meet you with Grace but unfortunately that got fucked up and I got taken by a medusa thing and then I got chased by a *palulukan* and – "

"Neytiri," Jake interrupted, putting his hand on her knee to stop her. "Just tell what you tell me."

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Mo'at watching still with a sharp gaze, now directly on her son's hand on the Avatar's knee. Surreptitiously, she changed her seating position to one of kneeling, so to Jake it was as if she were only trying to become more formal and not that she was trying to throw off his hand. She breathed out slowly, and began again. "Avatars, they're made to be able to speak to you properly. So you would believe us, you'd trust us. And it was no different with me. They sent me here to learn your ways. So one day I could bring this message, and you would believe it."

Everyone waited with bated breath.

"The Sky People, they gave me three months. I've used one up. They gave me three months in which to tell you to leave. Leave Hometree, leave Tárontxar, and move far away. Because otherwise you're all going to die."

Mo'at's expression had changed from suspicion to downright fear. "Are you certain of this?"

Neytiri's ears went back, and she slowly nodded. Silence fell upon the group. She felt the need to fill it. They needed an explanation. "You know the mining? The humans are here to get something, from underground. And unfortunately, your home is sitting on the biggest deposit of it. And they will stop at nothing to get it. And I mean that when I say it – they will stop at nothing. Not death. Not destruction."

Mo'at turned to Grace slowly. "Sister, did you know of this?" she asked, her voice unable to mask her pain. "Surely not…"

Grace felt the spotlight right on her, and everyone looked at her. The latest Tsan'ten family member. The one they had trusted enough to bring into their midst, allow her to have their name. Would it all crumble? One look at N'deh, and she had a feeling it already had. She looked from Mo'at to Eytukan to Tzu'khan, all watching her. She couldn't lie. She just couldn't. Not to them. Her face contorted. "For a few days, yes," she admitted softly.

Mo'at sucked in a breath, her ears going down. Eytukan closed his eyes. But Tzu'khan did something utterly different.

He laughed.

At first, they all thought he'd gone quite mad, watching him as everyone lamented over the future whilst he saw it as a hilarity. But he looked directly at Grace, shaking his head. "How did I know?" he murmured, his lips slowly pressing into a hard line. He tilted his chin up, looking down at her. "I knew it. You would bring nothing but sorrow here. Did I not predict that?" He looked at his parents, as if waiting for them to say, 'You were right, we're sorry'. But they didn't; they didn't even so much as glimpse in his direction. So he turned right back onto the Avatars, his jaw flexing. Neytiri's eyes narrowed as Grace cowered away from it. "How dare you. Devil filth! I should killed you on the spot on Akwete's death day! It would have been so much better for you to share it with her…"

"Enough, Tzu'khan," N'deh said softly, but he didn't even try to say it loud enough for him to hear.

"No, it will never be enough!" He got to his feet, crossing the circle towards the Avatars. Neytiri snarled as he got close to Grace. Never had she hated him more than in this moment, and she got ready to leap across the scientist to protect her. But the eldest Tsan'ten boy didn't even get that close. His nostrils flared as he looked down upon her from a foot away, watching her hard. Grace swallowed and

looked up at him. "Never… Never will it be enough, Grace *Augustine.* " Her ears flew back. " *Because guess what? We saved you. We gave you a life. But you took more away and you are not worth that many. Not Yarse. Not Erit. Not Ta'em. Not Zareba. And most certainly not Akwete… So for that you must pay!* "

"NO!"

Neytiri's scream echoed off the walls, and it was enough to shock Tzu'khan that he didn't step towards Grace. She had seen his hand clench. He had been preparing to hit her. God only knows what else. But now he rounded on the ex-marine. "You," he snarled, and gave an animalistic roar that would have put the great *toruk* to shame as his hand came flying out towards her throat. She had fast enough reflexes that she saw it coming, and her hand shot out to grasp his wrist, twisting it around quickly and aiming a knee at his solar plexus. She hadn't hit that hard, but it was enough to seriously wind him, and give Jake enough time to come and grab him back, clasping his arms behind his body.

She put her hands up slowly. She let her ears relax, her tail go limp, and kept her eyes down to show she wasn't a threat. "Guys, I'm not your enemy," she told them. "If I was, I wouldn't have told you. I would have waited the extra two months. But I'm here, standing before you, telling you what is to happen. Because I sure as hell don't want to see you all die, we both don't want that." She glanced behind her to Grace, who slowly blinked at them, a tear escaping her right eye.

The family slowly turned to the *olo'eyktan* , who in turn looked to Mo'at. He kept his voice low, but Grace kept her ears pricked to try and hear. " *My spirit path, I cannot make this decision on my own. Have you heard of anything from Our Mother?* "

The *tsahík* hesitated, quickly thinking. " *Directly? No. But She does work in mysterious ways. How can we ignore the sign Ja'kanhe told us of? What if we do? An omen, certainly. She would not be pleased*

to discover we ignored Her signs. But what if that sign was also a warning? "

Neytiri watched them carefully, the parents of the clan. She noticed that the signs for anger – a sharp tone of speaking, rigid tail and so forth – were not there. They looked simply defeated. Lost. Completely unsure what to do. Eytukan looked over to his youngest, who blinked slowly. Her heart was hammering in her chest. She had a glimmer of hope that they might be listening to her, but there was a lot of her that was telling her they wouldn't. Had she spoken well enough? Did she say something wrong?

Mo'at looked over to them, her golden orbs shining. She focused on Grace. "My sister, I would never go against you," she said softly, before turning to Neytiri. "And you… Something tells me there is something special about you. Eywa told us Herself. But I also feel it, inside. When I first saw you. I did not know whether the special part would be good, or bad. We now find, it is bad." She swallowed. Grace looked over to her, her eyes wide with fear. But Mo'at hadn't finished. "It is bad. But not your fault. You are good. You are one of us, are you not?"

She wet her lips and blinked. "Yes, of course."

She got a blink in response. "Then help us."

In the quiet moment after her declaration, Tzu'khan violently dropped down to get Jake off of him. But when he turned around, he wasn't about to swing at his brother. Instead, he just looked at his family, looking as if he'd never been so betrayed in his life. His expression was pained as he questioned, " *You trust her? After everything? What… what if she…* "

" *We will be wary, my son,* " Eytukan slowly said, which hurt Grace but she could hardly blame him. " *But if true, they are the only hope we have.* "

" *You said that last time after everything and look where it got us. Back here.* "

" *We would have ended up here regardless of their help.* "

The older boy looked like he had been scolded. His eyes slowly turned to his brother, and he whispered, "Ja'kanhe, not you, too…" He looked down at the floor, and nodded. He could actually feel the disappointment, the desolation radiating off his brother right now. But a look to Neytiri, and his decision was made.

"I trust her," he told his brother, never taking his eyes off the Avatar, who looked relieved at his admission.

"Why?"

He looked back to Tzu'khan. "Has she given reason why we should not?"

His brother opened his mouth, undoubtedly to retort, 'No, but she has!' concerning Grace. But realised it was a moot point. There is only so many times one can say an argument before it just becomes words. He swallowed and clenched his jaw, coming closer to Ja'kanhe. He looked right down at him, and the younger brother began to feel very small. " *Were you a human in an alternate life?* " he asked quietly, his voice sounding shaky. " *An Avatar driver? Is this why you are so sympathetic towards them?* "

Respect had to be earned, and Tzu'khan had lost it with Ja'kanhe. When exactly it had been lost was uncertain. When he screamed at Grace, tried to kill her when Akwete died? When he packed up and left the clan with barely a goodbye, leaving his own mother crying at the bottom of the staircase? When he just tried to hit Neytiri? There were many instances that could have done it, but sure as day, it was gone. So now he looked right up to him, directly and defiantly into his eyes, unafraid of any retribution for not revering his older brother. " *Who knows?* "

Nothing more was said. Tzu'khan slowly backed away, all the fight just taken out of him. He just walked past his family and out of the room.

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The clan had finished dinner by the time they came back down. The fire had died down to just a few embers and everyone was preparing for bed. The area hummed with the soft susurrus of conversation of the last remaining members. Grace watched as her mate walked towards a group of young hunters to discuss with them some plans for hunting tomorrow. It was as if nothing had changed, nothing had been said. But from the stiffness of his body, she knew everything had. She had a feeling she would be sleeping alone tonight.

Jake fell into step beside Neytiri, the two walking with matching strides towards the fire. "Thank you for your support, my Jake," she said to him quietly.

"No, thank you," he replied. He stopped walking, and she did the same, turning to face him. "You save us?"

It was a question, not a statement, and she was glad for it. There was no way she could guarantee it. She had told him that as they lay together, and she was amazed at how composed he had been. She had spent the time throughout the meeting with the family wondering if it was just a show, if it would all unravel when Tzu'khan pointed out every flaw in the plan. But he had supported her. "I'll do my best. I promise."

He breathed out slowly. "It is all I ask."

Eytukan came to stand beside his son, and said something in a flurry of words she had zero chance of keeping up with. Jake turned and translated: "He ask if we tell clan now?"

She looked at the leader in shock, amazed he was turning to her for guidance. She had never seen him look so unsure of himself. She

shook her head. "Not yet. Let them have a good night's sleep." In her head, she added, *Eywa knows it might be the last one they get.* Jake translated, and Eytukan dipped his head towards her, which surprised her all the more. *Are you actually turning to me completely for this? Fuck.* Now she really realised – this was on her shoulders. Grace couldn't plot strategy. And even the freaking Na'vi leader was bowing to her. He said something else to his son, who translated again: "He say he has idea. There are two clans near the Omaticaya. They might be able to help in some way?"

Neytiri was wary. She didn't know how many people she wanted in on this. Or perhaps that would be beneficial? *Jesus Christ, you really are making me decide all this.* She did her best not to freak out. "Maybe?" she tried, giving a shrug. Eytukan found the movement strange, and Jake explained it and what had been said. Or she assumed that was what had been said. Her Na'vi was decent, but going up against people from the motherland, she didn't have a hope in hell.

He said something else. "They are very… how do you say, 'discreet'?" Jake offered, and she swirled the word around in her head; it could work. "Zuleika, to the west, of Kxaylaya clan, and Tihawnu, south, of Wampanoapa clan. They are friends. Good warriors."

She nodded, figuring if the *olo'eyktan* suggested them, they were obviously good. "All right, maybe get the leaders down here, and we can talk to them?" she offered, speaking it to Eytukan but Jake translated quickly for his father. Eytukan blinked again at her, and then left them, perhaps to summon them. She found herself alone again with Jake. She didn't know what to say to him. She felt like she was walking on a thin log – one wrong thing to say and it would snap, letting her fall to the forest below. She looked at him. He looked at her. "Why?" she asked.

His ears pricked forward. "Why what?"

"Why do you trust me? I'm not saying you shouldn't, I'm just… curious. Your brother certainly doesn't."

Jake's expression seemed to harden at that. "He has different views," he said critically. "Ones I do not share. Not anymore."

"Jake, I don't wanna make you question all this and your trust in me completely disappears but, I need to know. Why?"

He paused, putting his knuckle to his lips in thought. "I cannot say exactly," he slowly said, "but… you have this, light around you. I see it. I seen it when I first met you. It was a light that told me you special. And I could only stop and watch you. And you are special. Not just because you help us, but you are special. To me."

She was smiling by the time he reached the end of it. She gently nudged him with her arm, and he gave a small laugh. He had every right to hate her. He had every right to be rid of her. But he didn't. It was more than someone could say for most humans. She gave a soft laugh at the thought, and when he turned to her confused, "Just remembering the crack your brother made about you being an Avatar."

He smiled. "I would have been good." He put his shoulders back. "Better than you."

"Oh, yeah?" she asked, looking at him with a raised eyebrow. "So what, you would have been… Jake Sully?" He exploded with laughter, having to bend over with how much he was, and she continued in a regal voice. "Yeah, I can totally see it! And you come to me and I could have been the one to torment you in training. I would have been the princess instead, which would have been freaking cool." She grinned, obsessing over her little daydream. "Man, I can really see you as one. This human guy with stupid ass hair. Oh wait, that's you currently."

She earned a whip-like flick of his tail, and the two of them were laughing. " 'Sully'?" he questioned.

"Eh, I dunno. A name I plucked out of thin air."

He ran a hand over his hair, feeling the way it was shaved and pulled back, and curled his lip. "I always hated it," he admitted.

She gently touched his elbow with her hand. "I think it looks better than you think," she told him honestly.

He looked at her softly. "What do you look like?" he asked quietly. "Human?"

She paused, wondering how to answer. It got her thinking. What would he think of her in human form? Over the past few weeks, she had grown far more attached to her alter ego. It really was an alter ego. She felt so different, felt she acted so differently, in this body. *Would you still treat me the same way?* she couldn't help but wonder. But he didn't get to give her a response, as the two of them heard a, "Where have you been?"

Instantly, his smile vanished. The two of them turned to see Tsu'tei marching towards them. She realised her hand was still on his elbow, and slowly dropped it, folding her arms behind her back. "Family meeting," he responded to her curtly.

I don't think you should have said that, Neytiri thought, looking at the way the young woman's face crumpled, and just knew she was thinking, 'Without me?' When she looked up at the prince, she noticed this gleam of pleasure present in his eyes – it was as if he was glad he had hurt her. After all the shitty things this woman had said, she was shocked she didn't enjoy the way he reviled her. Not completely. *None of your business,* she thought, and with it, she excused herself, walking past Tsu'tei.

Ja'kanhe focused on Tsu'tei. She opened her mouth, and murmured, " *Shouldn't I be included in family dealings? Not her?* "

" *With the amount of scorn you just used to mention 'her', no* ," he said, moving past her. " *She's acting more like a Tsan'ten than you*

are. "

" *Ja'kanhe, I am to be your mate tomorrow!* " He stopped in his tracks. She quickly moved over to stand in front of him so he couldn't avoid looking at her. " *How can you treat me with such a disregard?* "

He didn't know what it was. Maybe after having sex with Neytiri, something in him had utterly broken. He just couldn't envision doing anything like that with Tsu'tei, not at all. The way Neytiri made him feel… Even when she did something wrong, she had him laughing and joking with her, the incident soon forgotten. But when this one so much as opened her mouth, he had to fight with himself to stay under control and not yell at her. The feeling had been there for a long time, but it had completely broken the surface, especially when his eyes flicked up to see Neytiri talking quickly with his mother. *She is so strong, so brave,* he knew. She could be killed by her own kind for what she was doing, he was sure of it. And here she was. And then he looked at his betrothed, and realised she wasn't. There was a part of him angry at himself for being so harsh to her, yet another was egging him on. And that side won, so there was no regret when he informed her:

"The mating is off." And he headed off in another direction, ignoring her calls back, demanding an explanation.

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He hadn't been sure of where he was going. He was so burned up at Tsu'tei he didn't realise he had found his way to where Tzu'khan tended to sleep these days, away from the clan and away from the family. As he found himself at the entrance, he turned on his heel and began to turn away, before he saw his brother. He was sitting in the corner of the room, sitting in a foetal-like position, breathing slowly. He stopped in his tracks, his ears going back at the sight. Until the recent past, Tzu'khan had always been the one he looked up to. The one he had gone to for help. His best friend. They'd lost one another along the way. Yet despite their missteps, he couldn't help but think of what their father had said to them not that long ago.

Our sons are tearing one another apart. As they have been for their entire lives. It wasn't completely true. There were good memories; just after everything, they were hard to recall. When something horrible has been happening for so long, it is next to impossible to dig deep to find something good.

" *Brother.* " Tzu'khan turned at the sound of his voice. " *Are you all right?* "

There was hesitation. Tzu'khan looked away, staring straight ahead. " *I've been better,* " he finally said.

He came in bit by bit, as if he were walking into a cage of a wild animal. But there was no argument, no anger, nothing. He could feel the pain within the walls of the area, as if they were impregnated with it. All the suffering his brother had gone through. It hit into him so hard he felt it could knock him off his feet. The hard shell of bitterness wasn't here, and it broke it his heart.

" *I want you to know that we did not support them to spite you. We did it because we are at absolute loss of what else to do. If what she's saying is true – and it is – then…"*

" *Then if we don't receive help, we're all dead* ," Tzu'khan finished quietly. His ears went back, his tail dragging on the ground.

Ja'kanhe looked at him. He was spent and he could see it. All the anger was being used up. All the reserves had dried up and disappeared. There was absolutely nothing left. Now he was just left with the mess in the wake of the destruction.

" *What was it like? Out there, in another clan? Without your family?* "

Tzu'khan twisted his head, a frown creasing his features. It was if he was trying to suss out if this was a trap. " *No one has asked me that* ," he said warily.

He blinked. " *Well, now I am.* "

All of a sudden, the frown vanished. His breathing seemed to quicken and his eyes appeared to be a very long way away as he recalled. He rested his head on his knees, looking at the floor but not seeing it. " *Honest truth?* " he asked softly, and when Ja'kanhe affirmed, " *It was awful.* " He sounded as small as he had made his younger brother feel just a little while before. " *I thought leaving would get rid of all the demons that ravaged my mind but quite the opposite. As father pointed out, I just acquired more.* "

Ja'kanhe gradually stretched his hand out to put it on his shoulder. " *We all go through tough times, my brother.* "

" *This was a time I… I just couldn't handle* ," he said low. He swallowed, his body drooping as if it had no strength left. Perhaps he didn't. " *I just… I just wanted to leave, because every turn, every corner of Hometree, I expected to see her. Just around the bend. But she was never there.* " He looked back to him, his eyes as wide as the moon. " *You know I haven't even gone to the Tree of Voices to talk to her… I just… I just can't.* "

He was at a loss of what to say. He'd never experienced losing someone like that. Not like that. The person he'd lost had come back. " *She's watching over you,* " he said, " *with Eywa.* "

Tzu'khan sniffed. " *I hope so. At least she can see me.* " He straightened up, leaning against the wall and looking dead ahead. " *You know the awful truth?* " He dropped his voice to a barely audible whisper, ashamed. " *I can't even remember what she looks like, brother…* "

Ja'kanhe opened his mouth, and then closed it, his ears going back.

" *It's been a seasonal cycle. A year. Only a year. And my mind can't envision her. And the more I try, the more I lose of her.* " He put his face in his hands, his fingers splayed across.

" *Grace has a photo of her. If you'd like to see –* "

" *You're missing the point,* " he said, suddenly sounding sharp as he lifted his eyes up from his hands. But it faded as quickly as it had come. His ears hung low. " *It's only been a year, Ja'kanhe. You know, when I was out there, I even sometimes had difficulty remembering… what you looked like. And Mother. And Father. Now that I'm home my recollection is there.* " He dropped his hands limply to his sides, looking up to the ceiling. " *But she is not. I cannot remember what she looked like… Her face is just a blur. And her voice is long gone from my memory, her laugh, her mannerisms. All I know is… is that she is all I ever wanted. Was all I ever wanted… And she was torn away from me. By them… And I can't even go back into my own head to see her. My. Own. Head.* "

There was absolutely silence in the air, marred only by a cough from Tzu'khan or a clearing of his throat as he tried to pull himself together. Ja'kanhe squeezed his shoulder harder. " *Grace taught us in science that our minds can't create faces,* " he said meekly, forgetting what a taboo subject he had just brought up. " *We cannot remember well either unless we are constantly positioned around them. So don't blame yourself for forgetting – it's just how it happens.* "

This time it was different, and it told him that his older brother was absolutely done. Anger was gone. He didn't even try to argue against the mention of Grace's name. He had no fight left. He just gave a sharp breath. " *You always idolised her.* "

He bowed his head. " *I would like to point out that you did, too.* "

" *This is true,* " he said weakly. He looked right away from Ja'kanhe, looking down at the floor on the opposite side of him. He spoke so softly, and from his position, he really had to strain to hear his brother say, " *I still do.* "

Ja'kanhe's ears flickered.

" *I missed Grace, all the Avatars, everyone. I know my… my past actions don't show that but you have to understand – surely at some*

point you've missed someone terribly, but at the same time wanted them dead? You want to see their face but you don't want them to see the light of another day? I loved Grace as much as our own mother, but I know perfectly well as children, you and I used to even mutter obscenities against our own if she didn't always let us have our way."

" *But you didn't want our real mother dead. You've never hit our real mother.* "

He sighed. " *No. I suppose this is me saying that I know I went too far. Yet I cannot squash the feeling that it wasn't far enough.* "

Ja'kanhe did his best to put together that puzzle, and found himself failing. " *That is a great confusion,* " he acknowledged.

Tzu'khan carefully rose to his feet after moving out from under his grip, stretching his back and looking down at him. " *Welcome to my private hell. You asked.* "

He followed suit by standing up, feeling the conversation had come to a close. But he had to ask it. He had to know. " *I would like you to think very carefully about the next question before you answer it.* " Tzu'khan blinked. " *What do you really want, Tzu'khan? Do you want Grace dead? Or do you want her alive?* "

It felt like the longest pause between them as his brother thought. After their conversation, he honestly had no idea which path Tzu'khan would take. *I'm so sorry my brother* , he thought, his tail hanging low. *I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. I feel I could have done more. I'm sorry I didn't know how to help you cope. For now I see exactly what sort of a hell you were put through, and I am so sorry.*

Slowly, the eldest Tsan'ten boy looked at his brother.

" *Alive.* "

Chapter Ten

A side note: This story is going on far longer than I thought so I've been adding little sub-plots here and there. To begin one of them, you will have to now go back to Chapter 2, where I have inserted an important little scene. It's in the part where Nicole, Grace and N'deh have landed in the field. To make it easier, I've bolded the part you have to read – please do, else the next couple of chapters might not make as much sense!

Chapter Ten

Neytiri pushed up the shell of the link, blinking her raw eyes. She had been under for over 16 hours, and she knew her body was crying out for sleep and nourishment. She stretched her arm out haphazardly until she felt the armrest of her wheelchair, gliding it over. With not as much elegance, she pulled herself into the seat, her muscles protesting after being in stasis for so long. Casting her brown eyes around the link chamber room, she saw Grace's still firmly shut, yet the image on the computer screen showed minimal activity. She wasn't wired to her Avatar currently. Rolling herself over, she felt no qualms as she lifted the top up. Grace stared right at her, but Neytiri knew she was looking without seeing.

"All good, Grace?"

There was silence in response, save for their breathing and the whirr of the machine. Neytiri nodded, and said, "I'm gonna make up a coffee. And some food. You need to have something."

"He told me I didn't deserve the name of Tsan'ten."

She had been in the process of trundling herself out of the room when she heard that. Hanging her head, she came back, resting her forearms on the side of the chamber. But to Grace, it was just a coffin now.

"You know, I can count on my left hand the number of times I've argued with him during our marriage and courtship. And that had to be the worst."

If she had unfixed ears in this body, she knew they would have flown back. It was hard for her to accurately show the scientist just how sad she felt; expression was not her strong suit. "Do you wanna talk about it?" she asked softly. It was all she could offer.

Grace was no longer crying. She wondered if she was cried out, if her Avatar had used up the water reserves for it. She just continued to lie on the gel, staring up at the grey ceiling. All she could think of were the stars that would be above her head out there, the beautiful gas giant Polyphemus looking down on them, and hearing the cries of the forest night. It was just all man-made in here. Who ever said that was better? Whoever said they were better? If she had had a wish throughout her life, it would have been to be born Na'vi from the get-go and save all the drama for someone else's life.

"The day I met you," she said, causing Neytiri to look up, "we argued. N'deh and I, I mean. It was playing on my mind after I dismissed you. I knew you were coming. I told him, and that you'd probably come with me. He was fine with it, until I said you were a soldier. It was… an error, on my part. He didn't see how upset I was with the organisation either, he just shut off when I said you were that. He told me he didn't want to meet someone who took part in the systematic slaughter of society. His words. I told him I wasn't too thrilled either, and we had to keep an eye on you, he could hardly believe it. Obviously, he changed his mind when he did meet you. But now I just… I don't know.

"All I could think of," Grace continued, "was how you could come and screw everything up. You did. Royally. But ultimately, you did – or you are – saving them. Saving us."

Neytiri sighed and leaned back in her chair. "That was an emotional rollercoaster you just had me on."

"I'm sorry." Sitting up, Grace rubbed the nape of her neck, and looked over at her. Even through all the turmoil, she gave a half-smile in the woman's direction. "You know, you coming to Pandora was the best and worst day of my life."

She returned the expression. "Well, me meeting Jake was the best and worst day of my life." In a hushed tone, "I really think of how things could have been so different often."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah… I mean, if Sylvia had been here instead of me. I know sure as hell that Quaritch and Selfridge wouldn't – couldn't – have turned to her. I guess I'm just the weak link in the Avatar's armour."

The sound of an incoming video call meant Grace couldn't respond. They looked at one another with the same fretful expression – why would someone be calling so late? It was nearly 11:45 at night. There was an unwritten rule amongst humans – never call so late at night, unless the news is bad.

Pushing herself out of the room, Neytiri reached the desk first with Grace hot on her wheels. The tablet came up the profile picture of the caller, so it was easy enough for her to say, "Trudy's calling" before settling before it. Tapping it with her finger, the video of the pilot came onto the screen. "Hey Trudy," they said in unison and afterwards Grace asked, "What's going on?"

The look of the pilot told them she was stressed – really, her hair was in such a disarray, her skin oily and her eyes red from lack of sleep. "I've been instructed to come and pick you up now. Be ready. Quaritch wants a meeting with both of you."

The two exchanged anxious glances.

"Do you two know what this could be about?"

"I have an inkling," Neytiri murmured.

"Well, considering how pissed he's been for the past day, that's a bad sign. Don't tell me now. I'm waking up and coming over to you. Be ready for me." *Click.*

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The two of them wet two towels and just dabbed themselves with it, before Grace sprayed copious amounts of deodorant over them. It was all they could do in lieu of a shower. Before Neytiri could protest, a brush was pulled through her dark hair. It had grown considerably, and with no tending it had taken over her scalp like weeds in a garden. Her short bob had now grown to an unruly mess that hung around her shoulders, and the fact she rarely had time to even brush it meant that the pain Grace gave her as she tugged was alarming.

"Best I can do," Grace muttered, running the brush quickly through her own hair after pulling out the black strands. But any beauty procedure was lost on them as they considered what this could mean.

"Did you say anything?" Neytiri asked her honestly, and Grace replied, "No, nothing. Not even in my video logs. You?"

"One thing in the military that they don't plan on teaching yet do is how to lie. I haven't said a word."

The two looked as uneasy as they felt, and they both knew they had to quash those feelings else it should show up visibly on their faces. If they showed up looking guilty, there was no hope whatsoever, even if there was anything. They were both wracking their brains for exactly what this could mean. Had they stepped a foot wrong? Had he somehow found out about their escapades within the Omaticaya? Impossible, Neytiri assured herself, as there was no other Avatars there but them, and the only Na'vi who had any type of communication with the humans really was N'deh. Yet he had stopped going to RDA the moment Grace informed him her human form wasn't there any longer. Whatever this was, they knew it wasn't good.

The loud arrival of the helicopter startled them both. They were so used to just being the only humans with the only human technology that the sound was alien to them. They quickly grabbed their masks off the hook and placed them on their faces, opening the door and coming out so Trudy didn't come in. They were taking no chances. In fact, Neytiri was already kicking herself for the two of them looking as blameworthy as they had whilst she had spoken to them in the video chat. *Honestly, who can we trust except one another now?* The stakes weren't high for everyone else as they were for them. Others weren't going to potentially lose their families and friends.

They quickly headed outside, the effort from Grace of trying to make them look a bit more presentable disappearing as the helicopter whipped up their hair. Ducking as Trudy had only turned down the speed of the propellers, they rushed inside, only to have a rude awakening.

"What's this one doing here?" Grace asked loudly of Trudy as she surveyed Norm, who sat opposite to her.

The other scientist looked astounded at her rudeness. "Excuse you," he murmured in a dark tone – or as the propellers were going off, the supposed murmuring was more of a loud, hard saying. "I was with Trudy when she got the call! And FYI, I'm quite insulted you took off without telling me."

Neytiri leaned back into the seats, her hip touching Grace's and she sent hers to nudge her to get her to drop it. She knew the two scientists didn't like one another, or she knew that officially now. She wasn't sure where it had properly stemmed from, though Grace knew herself that it had all begun the first time Norm even opened his mouth. Something about him just frustrated her, and she maintained that frustration all the flight back. It was a long half hour as no one spoke to one another.

The minute they touched down, Grace leaped so quickly out of her seat it was as if the leather were hot coals, and as Neytiri was about to protest to her to wait, the scientist quickly came around to help her

out. She was so lividly determined to get this over and done with, she came across as indignant as a *talioang* when it was provoked by a predator. Rather than running, she was standing her ground. Someone was trying to hurt her family and she wasn't having any of it. Neytiri could assume she was channelling the anxiety over N'deh into anger, and perhaps seeing Norm had really set her off.

"Grace, calm yourself," she murmured softly as she rolled quickly to keep up with the pace that was set. "There's no point running in blind and starting a fight right off the bat as we have no idea – "

BANG! BANG! BANG!

"Quaritch!" Grace called out, and the door slid open after her furious knocking which had sounded almost like gunshots. They had to wait in the small compartment for several moments for the air to clear out, and once they could taste oxygen from the room, she discarded her mask and stormed right in. Not as many officers were in the administration area at the desks as usual, considering the time, but Quaritch was there, arching a grey eyebrow at the entrance. Beside him stood Parker, looking more terrified from the stance of the scientist than anything else. "Oh good, you're home."

As Neytiri came behind Grace, Quaritch came towards them, looking like a picture of perfect ease as he strolled lazily over, carrying a mug of coffee. "Good morning to you too, Ms Augustine," he greeted, as it was already 12:30 am. "And I'd be surprised if I wasn't, considering it was I who called you."

It took all of Grace's willpower to sidestep the misuse of her name and title, but she ignored it and said, "Yes, it is the morning. We need sleep. What the hell do you want?"

"Well, I'm sorry to anger you for no reason as I just needed to talk to your little foot soldier." He actually appeared annoyed now that she was here. He looked over in Neytiri's direction, and she kept her expression blank, though inside she was now fuming herself at the comment. He bent down, and asked in an almost condescending

tone, "Moakley. I haven't heard anything from you. How are we going?"

She knew he wasn't trying to make small talk. She knew perfectly well what he was asking. "Fine."

Grace was so burned up she blurted out, "She's doing quite well on infiltrating the Na'vi camp, yes. I know all about your heinous little scheme."

He glanced slowly in her direction. His dark eyes looked blacker than ever as he straightened up, no doubt to deliver a painful emotional blow, but it was Parker who stepped in. He came in between the scientist and the colonel, and spoke for the latter: "I can neither confirm nor deny any plans that we may have towards the natives."

"Do you realise that saying you neither confirm nor deny something means you effectively confirm something? Take example: if I were to say that I can neither confirm nor deny Parker Selfridge is an ignorant little shit who only wants to lower better people than him to his level, what would you take that to mean?"

Neytiri's mouth dropped open at the audacity of Grace, and had to disguise a laugh as a cough. Selfridge tilted his head upwards, trying to establish height dominance which was impossible as she was 11 centimetres taller than him naturally. "No need to get personal, Grace."

It was Quaritch who turned to Neytiri then, a vicious frown crossing his face. "You little rat."

"She didn't tell me," Grace lied so effortlessly it almost scared her. "In fact she didn't even need to because this is just… classic Miles Quaritch. The one who isn't satisfied unless things go his way. Or classic Parker Selfridge – honestly, where do I place the blame for this major fuck up?"

"I ought to fire you on the spot for that."

"I'd like to know – what do the people back on Earth think of this breach of human rights?"

" 'Human'?" At this Selfridge gave a malicious laugh. Grace had raised her voice enough from the beginning to draw the attention of many of the workers around them, and in unison some began to laugh with their boss, and what made Neytiri sick was that she had a good feeling that they weren't laughing just to be part of the crowd. *You genuinely believe that they aren't. You genuinely believe they are just savages.* "Don't make me laugh, Grace. Your little puppet show with the natives has proven more than anything that they are useless to us. Hell, I could call Hegner in here right now and have him agree with me. We've given them everything but they throw it back in our faces and we have proof of it. Never have they taken anything we have offered them. Even your so-called school was a waste of time because how many Na'vi in the grand scheme of things know English? No court in the world will ever see them as anything other than eight foot tall animals who share more characteristics with the common house cat than humans."

Neytiri scowled. "I gotta ask – what's the weather like up there on your high horse, Selfridge?"

"Stay the hell out of this, Nicole," Quaritch warned whilst Grace said quietly to her, "It's okay, I've got this." In a louder tone she said, "Look, Parker, I have fought you for years and years on exactly how to deal with the Na'vi. This is not the way to do it."

He crossed his arms and stood in a wide stance. "I'm not about to let a few bleeding hearts and a bunch of primitive mud-men stand in the way."

"Parker – "

"Hey, no! It's a big planet. They can move!" He was so angry that the veins were practically popping out of his neck.

"You don't understand," she almost screamed at him, her voice reaching levels she didn't even know she was capable of. "Parker, you just can't do this! You'll kill everyone – ! The Na'vi will not take kindly to this, mark my words. You just do not understand – "

"What? What exactly do I not understand, Augustine?"

"At the end of the day, Grace, this is not in your level of authority, and never was," Quaritch added.

If it weren't for Neytiri quickly reaching out to grab Grace's hand back, which she had noticed had turned into a hardened fist, she had a feeling the conversation would go south even further than it already had. *While I would pay copious amounts of money to see you in a brawl with Miles, now is really not the time. We can't have them catch onto our plans.* "Grace, Grace!" she cautioned hurriedly, giving a gentle tug on her wrist to calm her down. Feeling her relax under her hand, seeing her shoulders slump in surrender, "We cannot. Let's just go. We can't do anything. We don't have a leg to stand on."

"Damn right you don't," Quaritch growled, and she knew perfectly well he was looking directly at her when he said so. His jaw was clenched, and he almost said through his teeth with a shake of his head, "I never should have let a woman do a man's job. You're too weak of will to accomplish anything because of your 'woman problem'."

Grace mechanically turned her head to him. She took a slow step towards him, glancing down to his height. "You know," she susurrated, "we're thought of as weak because we have a vagina. There's even a verbal slur concerning it to denote 'weak'. I'm assuming that's the problem you mean. Women are considered fragile yet I've never seen anything as easily wounded as a man's ego."

She looked over at Neytiri and tilted her head to the side, and the two began to walk out the door. Behind them Quaritch spat, "You

know what, you and your feminist bullshit can take a hike you Avatar slut!"

"Whoop, there it is," Neytiri affirmed with a nod as she wheeled herself out of the room, ignoring the laughter from the men in the office and feeling satisfied as she let the door slam behind them.

Inside the chamber, they put their masks on before being confronted with the outside air. Grace flopped her head into her hands. She ran her fingers down her nose and breathed out slowly. "I don't even know where half of that came from," she marvelled at herself.

"Neither, though under different circumstances I would have taken some pleasure from it." She turned to her boss, but waited until they were outside of the chamber to whisper to her, "I'm terrified they will catch onto what we are doing."

"Between all of them, they barely have two neurons to rub together. They won't catch on."

"There's more of them than just those two, Grace. You literally screamed 'blue murder' in the office."

"Do not fret – we'll be fine."

But what they didn't realise was that someone had caught on, and she watched from the office as the two went past the large window that oversaw the airfield. She licked the lipstick on her lips, and eyed them, thinking.

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The sky was rose and gold as the sun broke over the forest. Mo'at watched the light spread from the top of their home. She sat on the moss-covered tree limb, listening to the *ikran* caw. Below her the world turned from indigo with rivets of bioluminescent hues to a green. Pale white mists rose off the cluster of waterfalls in the distance. On a windy day, even from such a far location, sometimes

one could feel the water delicately spraying across. Her mother had always told her that the waterfalls were the tears of the forest. There was suffering and sadness as their Mother saw, but She didn't have many outlets for it, so when there was a waterfall, the water plunged over the rocks and cliffs with incredible strength. As she thought back, Mo'at had the sudden impression that the waterfalls had never run with more power until just after Ja'kanhe was born, and the humans had arrived. Their Mother wept with worry for her children. She herself wondered how powerfully her tears would run if she failed her own.

" *The boys told me you were up here* ," came Eytukan's voice, and she turned around to see him. He walked over to her, touching his hand to his forehead. " *I see you.* "

She blinked and did the same movement. " *I see you.* " When he came over to her, a smile crinkled his features and he bent down to kiss her briefly. She nuzzled his neck and then patted the spot beside her, and he sat with her. His tail danced elegantly across hers, and she gave him a slight jolt with her hip. " *Not here.* "

" *Well, no one's around.* " She gave a snort of laughter, and he settled to drape one of his strong arms around her shoulder, and let her lean into him. There was silence between them; the sound of the *ikran* became irrelevant to her as her ears picked up the rhythm of his heart. She wasn't sure if he had come to speak to her of something, or just to find her company. " *You know* ," he said out of the blue, " *when I was younger, I made a lot of decisions up here. I would climb up to the top of Hometree and think of my future. And one of the decisions I made was that I would be the best leader I could be once my parents passed on. Oh, and* – " His fingers trailed along the base of her queue, making her giggle and shiver like a young teenager from the shock and enjoyment of it. " – *I did ask you to be my mate up here.* "

" *And I refused you.* "

" *Twice.* "

" *Three times!* " The two looked at one another and laughed together. While it was true, ultimately Mo'at was glad she had said yes in the end. Her life would have been very different otherwise. " *I just suppose I never saw myself as a tsahík. I think the first time I thought you were playing a joke on me, because I absolutely had no idea how to be what I am today.* "

" *Yes, you weren't lucky like Tsu'tei – you didn't have someone to instruct you in the art of it.* " She breathed out slowly, chewing on her lip. He pulled away from her a bit to look at her properly. " *What? What did I say?* "

She sighed. " *Did you… find something strange yesterday?* "

" *With Neycole telling us what was to happen? Of course that was strange, my spirit path. I was trying hard not to think of it –* "

" *Well neither – now I am. But I meant in regards to our son and his student.* "

His eyes narrowed. " *I don't understand what you mean* ."

She wondered for a moment how to word this. And then she criticised herself internally for even beginning to say something. Now she was stuck – she shouldn't say anything to Eytukan as he would stress, but now he would pester her until he got out of her what was on her mind. " *I cannot shake the feeling that Ja'kanhe doesn't want to marry Tsu'tei.* "

Her mate didn't seem to know how to take this. His mouth opened and closed a few times as if he were trying to word something, but no sound came out, until he settled with, " *Sorry?* "

" *At the end of the day, he is not 12 any longer, my love. And that's the problem. We knew from the start that he and Tsu'tei didn't love one another. You and I did and that made it easier for us. So I get the feeling that he doesn't want to be with her, and instead… well…* "

He began to catch on now. His ears perked forward and his voice sounded a perfect blend of astonishment and disapproval as he uttered, " *Mo'at, are you insinuating that Ja'kanhe wants to be mated to Neycole instead?* "

It was as if saying the words summoned the young man, and she quickly pulled away from her mate as Ja'kanhe came up to see them. " *Good morning, Ja'kanhe, and Tzu'khan.* " She could barely disguise the shock in her voice as from behind Ja'kanhe came their eldest son. The last part nearly came out in a question for how foreign this scene was. And she could tell she wasn't the only one surprised; she could feel that her mate had frozen. When was the last time those two had been an image of cohesion?

They all greeted one another properly, before it was Tzu'khan who spoke. " *Father, Mother, our guests have arrived.* "

" *Oh, well, thank you for informing me.* " Eytukan rose to his feet and held out his hand to help her up. The two brothers blinked and then turned around to head back down the stairs, leaving their parents with a complete mixture of apprehension and curiosity. *What changed your minds on one another?* was the only question on Mo'at's mind as she followed her family down.

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"You want me there now?"

Neytiri had just stepped out of the cool morning waters of the river. With the sun not having heated it fully yet, it only maintained a fraction of the warmth from the evening, but she felt her body returning to a more comfortable temperature when she stepped out. She took her morning baths alone – the clan liked her but she knew that the stares that had plagued her first visit would return – and perhaps be intensified – if she were naked.

She had espied Jake walking over to her from between the ferns. The river that was across from Hometree was very much in the

open, and she ducked herself to just behind the tree line to wash. He came over to her as she wrung the water out of her hair, wavy from the braids she had taken out just before she slipped in. "Father and Mother say they need you to meet Zuleika and Tihawnu."

"Right, right." She shook some of the water off of her like a dog, brushing some of it off of her arms. As she flicked the water from her fingertips, she realised that he was averting his eyes to the floor, seeming suddenly very focused on the mud between his toes. For him, it was different – he wasn't the rest of the clan to her. "Jake, you do realise you've seen me naked?" she asked, making him look up quickly in surprise. He gave a nervous laugh and a smile. She simpered, looking pleased with herself as she wrapped the material around her breasts. Over time, she had gotten rid of the stomach band and given herself a lighter piece of material. The purple colour of the wrapping made her think of the colour that had risen in Jake's cheeks as she spoke to him. As she entwined the material to cover her chest and tied it up around the back of her neck, she put her loin cloth back on and sauntered past him, her tail teasingly flicking under his nose, the tuft running underneath his nostrils. "Well, you've done much more than just see me naked," she purred.

His eyes regarded her for a long moment, before he came to grasp her hand and kiss it. "True," he admitted, looking down into her eyes.

She pulled away from his grip just as he leaned down to kiss her lips. "Come on," she instructed whilst he grumbled, making her grin mischievously. "We have to go see your parents. Remember?"

" *Eywa woman* ," he muttered, making her laugh as she grabbed his hand to tug him back towards Hometree. Moments before they reached the open area that led to the clan, she dropped his hand and the flirtatious nature she had been carrying, letting him walk ahead of her to lead the way. Yet he fell into step beside her. "It is fine."

"Let us not dance with death more than we are," she murmured, smiling and greeting some of the members of the clan as they

walked through the open field. She watched as mothers with children went about their duties, other members cleaning fish they had caught, some preparing for the hunting trip they were planning later in the day. They were all smiling at her, giving the same genial attitude, though it may have also been due to Jake being beside her. As she smiled at them, she kept her lips almost unmoving as she said seriously in an undertone, "The last thing we need is Tsu'tei figuring it out, or Eywa forbid, your mother."

"I think she know." Neytiri looked over at him, the plastered smile being erased instantly. "You know my mother very intuitive."

"Well, fuck, let's pray she hasn't figured this out – hey!" Her eyes caught sight of the woman in question, and her voice instantly became jovial before she had even finished her previous sentence. Mo'at was standing underneath the strong columns of Hometree, with N'deh beside her. They gave their greetings before she blinked at the Avatar, and tilted her head to signal for them to head upstairs. N'deh kept his eyes straight ahead, and didn't so much as say a hello to Neytiri. *All right, screw you, too, after what you said to Grace.* Seeing Grace crying was more than she could bear, and knowing he was the reason ignited anger within her.

They made their way up to a room that she had never been in before, and looking around the circular alcove, and the way Tzu'khan, Eytukan and Tsu'tei were already seated in a semi-circle, she immediately got the impression of Parliament. *So this must be the council room* , she thought. It was certainly smaller than she expected, but she supposed their hierarchy wasn't too large. Eytukan sat at the 'top' of the circle, with Tzu'khan on his right and Tsu'tei on his left. Tzu'khan actually dipped his head to her in brief acknowledgment – he'd never so much as looked her way before if she had come into a room previously. But Tsu'tei… When Neytiri looked at her, she felt a slight pang of regret. The poor girl, who had been all ready to become a Tsan'ten that day, had done her hair in an elegant side plait, adorned with flowers that ran down the length. She wore a woven green top that brought out her eyes, which held

nothing but disappointment – and then, the moment she saw Neytiri, unadulterated hatred. *All right, I don't feel so guilty now.*

Beside Tsu'tei was a man she had never seen before. Middle-aged, she assumed, and he wasn't of Omaticaya; he wore his hair in a way she had never seen before, with it shaved across the top of his scalp and then beginning in his queue. But his most startling aesthetic that caught her off-guard was the wooden rod struck through the bridge of his nose in a piercing. She gave him a warm smile, doing her best not to show her shock, especially when she noticed the other guest on Tzu'khan's side. A young woman, a little older than her, who was covered in red and white war paint: on her face in a V-like shape from the top of her forehead to the end of her chin, and then a larger, similar shape took up most of her torso in red, and both shapes were outlined with a thick stripe of white. There was something odd about the paint. She was a beautiful woman, there was no denying, but why would someone wear such elaborate war paint if there was no battle to be had? Some elements of the paint around her shoulders seemed thicker than the rest, but Neytiri remembered her manners and stopped herself from staring so much. Apart from the paint to set her apart, her hair was pulled back in thick rope braids, and a headpiece of a bleached horn rested neatly on the curve of her skull. All of the elements together gave her a very memorable visual.

They all stood up as they entered the room, and Eytukan introduced them. He gestured to the woman, and said, "Zuleika" before looking to the man and saying, "Tihawnu Akwey".

"Tihawnu," he corrected in an adenoidal voice.

She nodded, and when she saw their bewildered expressions, she remembered to blink, and said, " *Good morning Zuleika and Tihawnu. Thank you for coming.* " She turned behind her to say to N'deh, "Please go and get Grace." He hesitated initially, but then blinked his assent and left to go and find his mate. Looking back to the group, Neytiri gestured for them to sit, and as they did, she motioned with her tail for Jake to sit beside her. "Please translate, my Na'vi only goes so far."

"Yes," he responded.

They all sat down just as Grace and N'deh returned. Grace obviously knew the two leaders, for they smiled and spoke with her in hurried Na'vi for a few moments. Neytiri gave a small smile, seeing the camaraderie between them. It gave her some hope.

Grace sat on the opposite side to Neytiri, and her mate sat beside her. "Sorry I'm late," she said in English.

"It's fine, we haven't started." To prove her point, she glanced over to Eytukan. He looked back at her expectantly. She straightened up, realising everyone was eyeing her. "Oh, you want me to start. Right."

Zuleika said some words to Jake, who gave a chuckle and turned to her saying, "She ask you to introduce self first."

"Ha! Right," Neytiri nodded, causing some sparse laughter amongst the group. *Off to a wonderful start.* She cleared her throat, and it rolled off her tongue: "My name is Neytiri Moakley."

The two newcomers – including some of the Omaticayan members – looked surprised. Zuleika gave a warm smile and turned to word something to Eytukan and Mo'at who now sat next to one another, at which the ones who fully understood Na'vi laughed. Neytiri picked up that Eytukan was saying "No" and then gestured at his son, so she asked Jake what had been said.

"Zuleika ask if Father and Mother name you, as they are… Grace, how do I say?" Jake asked her with a furrowed brow, unsure of how to continue.

Grace smiled and explained, her tail flicking happily as she still enjoyed the joke. She was finding something hilarious and she felt bad for Neytiri who wouldn't entirely understand it. "A pair of leaders, if there are members that do not have parents, are often considered foster parents. So they are the father and mother of the clan, literally. So Zuleika knows that you would have a different human name, so

she asked if Eytukan and Mo'at were the ones who gave you your new one. Of course, it was Ja'kanhe who did."

"I would like to say I am not your daddy," Jake clarified, and even those who didn't understand English caught onto what he was saying and laughed outright. But between Neytiri and Jake, they caught one another's looks, and shared their own private joke.

Zuleika captured their attention again, and Neytiri could tell that in the silvery and modulated voice she had, coupled with the smile, that she was saying something very pleasant. Jake said something in return, and she said something again, to which he laughed. Utterly confused, Neytiri bent to Jake expectantly. *Should have chosen Grace as my translator.* "Oh! Uh, she say your name… very suitable. You match meaning very well. And I say… I know."

"Oh." The two exchanged a smile. Grace's eyes flicked to Tsu'tei when this happened. It wouldn't have surprised her if Tsu'tei regarded the young woman as nothing more than the tree upon which the *palulukan* might like to sharpen its claws. And right now, she was eyeing Neytiri like she wanted nothing more than to topple her over and rip her throat out with her own teeth for ruining the wedding plans.

Mo'at was watching her son and the young Avatar. She knew in her bones she was right. She looked from their smile to her mate, arching an eyeridge; Eytukan rolled his eyes and brought the conversation back. " *Ja'kanhe, why don't you get… Neytiri to tell Zuleika and Tihawnu what's happening?* "

" *I can tell them exactly what's happening!* " Tsu'tei said, almost as sweetly as someone who was vying for approval from a higher ranking somebody, but she said this: " *We have a human problem and we need to drive them out as it's either us, or them, who dies.* "

" *Tsu'tei!* " Ja'kanhe chastised sharply.

" *I had to bring the conversation around somehow, as you two seemed to have forgotten it.* "

" *You dare –* "

"All right, hey, hey, hey!" Neytiri quickly said, stepping into the scene as she knew it had slipped out of her control. Zuleika and Tihawnu looked thoroughly bewildered, not to mention potentially apprehensive, at the shock of what was just said. All the guilt she had felt for Tsu'tei disappeared in an instant. She hadn't wanted to come out with it so quickly! She had just lost her audience instantly. With the deadly look she gave the young Na'vi, she found herself taking some sadistic pleasure in seeing Tsu'tei's sudden resolve waver under the glare. *I'll deal with you later, you selfish, up-yourself bitch.* "All right, yes, Zuleika, Tihawnu, we have called you here to speak of an issue that has come up recently."

" *We called you here to speak of a very current issue* ," Ja'kanhe translated.

Mo'at watched as the young leader of the Ikran clan blinked. " *The humans?* " she asked softly. " *It isn't a recent issue, Ja'kanhe – this has been going on for a while. I was amazed when I heard you two had brought them back,* " she said the last part to Mo'at and Eytukan. " *After… everything.* "

Grace swallowed at that. " *It was never my intention for any of that to happen.* "

Zuleika cast her shimmering gold eyes onto the Avatar, and gave a small smile, her ears perking forward. " *No, individuals are lovely* ," she reassured, though Grace wasn't entirely certain if that carried a trace of sarcasm. As Ja'kanhe rapidly translated, the woman went on: " *My point is, this could have been avoided.* "

" *Based on what we've been told, that isn't true,* " Eytukan said. " *Regardless of Neytiri being with us, this would be happening.* "

" *You were very vague in your summons, Leader Tsan'ten. Pray tell, what exactly is happening?"*

All eyes now turned to Neytiri, who recited the scenario for the fourth time. Zuleika and Tihawnu were silent as they took it in, and she didn't know how their reactions would be. Eytukan had said they were good warriors, but were they good allies? A good ally would stand beside them, but she didn't know.

" *You are asking us to die for a mistake you made, Eytukan and Mo'at* ," Tihawnu announced after several moments of silence. His voice almost came out in a growl. " *None of this would have happened as Zuleika said if you had not brought them back.* "

" *Did I not just say it would have happened regardless?* "

" *Not necessarily. What proof have you? And how are you not to know that this Avatar is not a spy? How do you know that there is no plot beyond this potential plot in order for you to make a plan of attack and have it completely overthrown by them? She could be saying words against you and you wouldn't know."*

" *Do you ever actually hear yourself speak, Tihawnu?* " Eytukan suddenly growled, and Mo'at put her hand on his knee to try and calm him, seeing the situation suddenly unravelling.

Neytiri swallowed and looked to Jake, who seemed at an absolute loss of how to translate. And perhaps it was a good thing, for Tihawnu was delivering the final blow:

" *So what will happen? Will your son then follow the same fate as my daughter which you allowed?* "

Eytukan sprung up so fast he nearly knocked his beloved mate aside. The room suddenly dissolved into an argument, the accusations flying. Tzu'khan shouted the loudest at this newcomer, his volatile side which had been repressed for the past couple of hours bursting forth again. At least it wasn't aimed at his family. The

tails were rigid, the ears back, teeth bared. Neytiri felt as if she had just stepped into some massive family drama. Even Grace was getting involved, and N'deh was trying to pull her back, to calm her down. The Tsan'ten's were all of a sudden angry at this leader, and Jake took a cue from his uncle and grabbed Neytiri back, but she wasn't having any of it.

"That's enough!" she bellowed, not even knowing if she was loud enough to be heard over everyone. No one stopped. *Fuck this, I'm so out.*

" *You caused her death!* " Tihawnu shrieked at the Tsan'ten's. " *I should never have let her associate with the likes of you!* "

" *We did everything in our power to protect them!* " Mo'at countered. " *It just couldn't be prevented.* "

" *Obviously not thanks to your little Avatar slut.* "

" *That is the second time I've been called that today,* " Grace bristled, her tail flicking wildly. N'deh continued to pull her back, now seeming to have to strain.

" *Great! Shall I make it a third?* "

" *You do not get to speak to her like that!* " N'deh snarled viciously, now letting her go whilst Grace roared, " *That's it! I am so sick of the male ego. I expected this from humans but not from you. I'm confiscating everyone's penis from here on in!* "

" *This has gotten out of hand!* " Eytukan growled. " *I asked you here for help, not for hostility.* "

" *You started the hostility amongst the clans!* " Zuleika countered, seemingly more to lend support to Tihawnu than the fact she actually believed it. " *Unless she proves us wrong, Eywa!* "

" *And you made it worse by inviting your little 'Neytiri' over here. Who does she think she is, taking one of our names?* "

" *She has no power!* "

" *She has no right!* "

" *She has more right than you!* "

" *Can we get back on topic?* "

" *Grace, get Neytiri out –* "

" *ENOUGH!* " Neytiri's voice rang out crystal clear, but it wasn't the reason everyone had stopped. At first she thought it was based on the way everyone had been looking at her, but they weren't looking directly at her. They were looking at her shoulder. Tsu'tei's mouth had dropped open; Grace puffed her chest out with pride; Eytukan and Mo'at were in awe; Tihawnu seemed to falter and almost tremble in her presence now; Zuleika gave a small smile, as if she were indeed glad she had been proven wrong. She felt a lithe warm feeling on her shoulder, and had a sudden sense of déjà vu, for there, on her shoulder, was the wafting, glowing white tendril. The seeds of the sacred tree. *Atokirina.* Swallowing, she reached her hand out, and the seed drifted to rest in her palm. She heard everyone draw in a breath as from the way her hand moved, and the creature followed as if it were attached, it was no coincidence. The white glow shone on her face as she held it by her chest. She looked down at the gently floating spirit, and said a silent prayer of thanks. "You know," she murmured, and she heard Grace murmur in Na'vi and realised she was translating, "when I lived on Earth, we were taught about you. About the Na'vi. A noble, gentle race. You still are. But no one ever talks about the pain you suffer, the tragedy, the drama, just like us. No one ever seems to mention that because you're supposedly above it." She glanced over to Tihawnu. " *Akwey* ," she breathed, making the connection. "Akwete was your daughter, wasn't she?" From the way the man's ears went back, he'd understood, and she was right. Neytiri's ears went down in turn, and she saw Tzu'khan

look at the floor. "Grace didn't kill her. She did her best to protect them." Grace slowly looked over, and sighed softly, before doing the translation. Neytiri looked at her for a moment before back at the group. "Humans… we're different to you. Somewhere perhaps in the way the universe was created, you got the majority of the good traits and, damn, we got some of the worst. Because while humans applaud your 'noble bearing', they exploit you. And that's what's going to happen. This is what I was told, and what I am telling you.

"The Sky People have sent a message that they can take whatever they want, and no one can stop them." She nodded slowly, and looked at Grace; she got a small smile in return, and it gave her strength which she put into her words. "But we're going to send them a message. I don't know how, but we will figure it out. Together. All of us. We have the power and the determination and the belief, and that is something no gun can ever take away from us! Not now, not ever."

Everyone watched Neytiri in awe. She cupped her hands and lifted them in front of her face, wearing a gentle smile as she blew softly on the spirit, letting it fly free. She observed the group with the light of the sun in her eyes, glistening brightly in her golden orbs. "So who is with me?"

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Eleven

In the years to come, Neytiri would wonder how in the world she accomplished anything in the next week. The possibility of succeeding was tantamount to failure, and it was a wonder she could even properly direct everyone. She suddenly gained a newfound respect for the Tsan'ten family, and, dare she even think it, Parker Selfridge and Miles Quaritch. How they managed to keep everyone in line was beyond her at the best of times.

The moment the words escaped her mouth, Zuleika and Tihawnu calmed, yet soon began to ask questions she couldn't hope in hell to answer. When exactly would it happen? Was there anything they could do? If they brought the clans, would that then become obvious as to what they were planning? Eytukan suddenly jumped in with when to tell everyone – now, or later? And she was conflicted with her own questions, and the biggest one was the most obvious: *How are we going to achieve the impossible?*

The ratio of succeeding to failing was not in their favour. She had known it from the start. It dug at her heart as, in all truthfulness, what exactly did they have against the humans? They were smaller, but that didn't matter in the grand scheme of things: they had the arsenal. Bows and arrows would only go so far. But she also had a small trick up her sleeve.

"Ja'kanhe," she said once the questions from the other leaders had ceased. Her mentor glanced up to look directly at her. "And Tzu'khan." His older brother glanced up in surprise that she mentioned his name. "I need you both to do some spying for me."

The group looked at one another, unsure how to take the suggestion. Even Grace looked confused. "On what?" Jake questioned.

She looked over to N'deh, and included him in the group. *You'd be handy for this.* "The three of you, I would like you to keep an eye on RDA. As time gets closer, I need to know what's happening. You won't be able to get a look inside, but that's okay, because believe me, you'll know if something big is about to go down.

The three family members looked at one another, and blinked. "How do we – how say – tell you?" It was Tzu'khan who asked the question. Neytiri realised that was the first time she'd ever heard him speak English. Grace had said he was one of her best students, and clearly, he had been great at the language – once. Over the year, with no use, it was clear it had gotten rough around the edges. His accent was thicker than Jake's. At first she was confused by the question – hadn't the Na'vi easily spoken to one another over long distances?

"The bond doesn't quite stretch to us," Grace explained. "As far as I can tell. We can't hear the forest as they can."

"Oh. Figures," Neytiri muttered tightly. *Fucking human DNA.* "All right, I have an idea for that. Humans have… created a way to speak over long distance without the bond. I can get on that. Two-way radio," she added for Grace's benefit, who nodded.

"Pick some of your best warriors," she continued to Jake, "and start patrolling that area. I know you're smart so you won't make it obvious. Pick, say… twenty. And Zuleika, Tihawnu – " The two snapped to attention. " – if you could get some members of your clan in on this that would be great. Perhaps having some more would be wise. We'll go from there." Grace quickly translated, and the other leaders agreed.

"And when they ask why we are picking member?" Jake asked.

She paused, and looked at Eytukan. " *We tell the clan?* " she asked him.

His ears flickered, and he narrowed his wise eyes thoughtfully. " *Yes.* "

"If you don't mind, I will leave that up to you, Mo'at and anyone else you deem fit – they will listen to you," she told him and Mo'at translated. The Omaticayan leader and the Avatar blinked their assent to one another, and then she turned back to Jake. "We will wait for the announcement. Tell them after. Keep them in the loop."

"Yes, Neytiri."

There was a little *ahem* that made her almost roll her eyes, but she stopped herself from doing so. The group looked over to Tsu'tei, who had been stone faced for the entirety. "How… radical, *Neytiri* ," she said, almost snarling the name, "but we cannot forget: they are more powerful enemy. How we fight?"

"Now I never said anything about fighting. Did I?" she asked, turning to Jake for clarification; he shook his head, his nostrils flaring as he looked at his betrothed. "We are simply taking a proactive stance on this."

But as she said it, she knew she was lying. This was going to be a bloodbath. And she needed everyone to be a part of it.

• • •

"C'mere, I need to show you something."

It was past ten pm that night. As she pulled herself into her wheelchair, she quickly moved over to the chest of drawers under the computer desk. Touching it with her finger to allow the biometric system to recognise the print, it slowly opened, and she grabbed what she needed.

"Whoa, didn't know you were packing heat up here," Grace commented, eyeing the two handguns that she had produced, as well as earmuffs and goggles.

"One of the number ones rules, Grace: ammo is cheap, life is expensive." She was about to throw one to the scientist over the table that separated them, but thought better of it, and wheeled herself around to plonk it in her hands, at which she exclaimed, "Christ, that's heavier than I thought!"

"And I didn't even give you a standard issue rifle – those babies can weigh up to 17 kg, and no I'm not kidding. What I gave you instead was what we tend to call the 'RDA Handgun', and it's the standard sidearm of those pricks. It's a good little gun, which they like to favour for its simplicity, durability and – of course – low production cost. It's a slide-based, composite-framed, semiautomatic pistol. It's not overly powerful so I thought it'd be good practice for you, and it's – wow, you're not taking anything I'm saying in, are you?" she asked, seeing Grace's eyes glaze over. "Hah, now you know what it feels like when you go all science-y. Now you know I'm not as idiotic as you thought."

She seemed to take offence at that. "I never once called you an idiot!"

"Actions speak louder, remember that," she said as she wheeled herself towards the door. "C'mon, let's go."

" 'Go'? Go where?"

"Outside, we're practicing."

Grace looked at the gun in her hand, and then outside. She swallowed, and put the gun down, feeling her own hands shake as she placed it back on the table. "You know," she said, forcing a smile as she wound her way out of the kitchen and headed towards where they would sleep. "It's late. We're not even going to be able to see what we're doing, and God forbid we hit an *ikran,* so let's – "

"Do it now," came Neytiri's cool reply. She waited for the words to sink into Grace's mind as she walked past, until she slowly turned

and came back, muttering, "Should have known those words would come and bite me in the ass someday."

"Great! Let's go outside, and get you some practice. God knows you need it after how atrociously you held that gun a few weeks ago." She went to pick up some drinking glasses to take outside, before going to grab a hair tie. In the few weeks, her hair had grown past shoulder length and to rest just below her shoulder blades, so now she had to pin it up. Begrudgingly, Grace followed Neytiri to the door, snapping on her mask. As they left the shack, the evening chill hit them, and before she could even say anything, Neytiri told her that it wasn't an option for her to go back into the warm air. She huffed and continued to follow, feeling an uneasiness growing in her which she tried desperately to suppress. Her heart pounded and her skin felt like it was crawling, especially in her right hand which held the gun.

Neytiri pushed her way over the grass, feeling guilty for the track marks her wheels left, but it was the best she could do. She went to a log towards the edge of the mountain, and lined up the glasses – five of them. She came back to be beside Grace. "Now, what's the difference between a revolver and a semiautomatic pistol?"

Grace looked at her blankly.

" *Moron* ."

" *Fuck you.* "

Neytiri gave a laugh and explained the differences to her, which Grace still looked blank for, so she gave up and just began. "All right, first of all, you need to make sure if it's loaded or not. Always. I cannot stress that enough. Enough people have lost their lives – or killed others – by thinking a gun wasn't loaded when it was. So let's check this one." She carefully instructed Grace in how to check it, and she noticed as they did it, that her hands were shaking. "All right, now stand with your feet shoulder-width apart… Very good. Put your foot opposite your dominant hand – no no, that would be your

left – yes, there we go. Put that past your other foot… yep, good. Now lean forward slightly… Knees bent. Comfortable?"

Absolutely fucking not, Grace thought, but she just gave a terse nod. She was so glad N'deh wasn't here to see this.

"All right. Pressure off you for a moment. Hold your gun down," Neytiri said, before telling her to put on the earmuffs and goggles as she did the same. "Now, watch me."

"What are you doing?"

"Showing you how it's done – " she said, just as she quickly put her own gun up and fired. Grace shrunk back from the shock of the sound, but when she looked to the makeshift targets, there were only four glasses left. Neytiri smiled and looked to her, tilting her head to towards them as if to say 'Your go'.

Grace swallowed. She felt a numbness in her throat and a quiver in her heart. *You can't do this… No, you can't… Yes you can. Come on, don't give up now.* But the moment she put up the gun, Neytiri was by her side, directing her again. She got her to put it down, and then try again. Every time she did she had corrections. Even when Neytiri showed her, with quick reflexes on how she did it, she found it difficult, and the strain was getting obvious.

"Look, why don't we try this in the morning?" Grace asked, sounding completely frustrated.

"When do we have time, Grace? We're up early in the morning, we shovel down breakfast and then go under for the next sixteen or so hours, and then to sleep, repeat cycle. Where do you see us having time in the morning?"

She grit her teeth. "Just not now, okay?"

"So when?"

"Do not force me on this."

Neytiri sighed and leaned back in her chair. The tone coming from Grace told her to stop pushing it. Naturally this was hard for her, and she knew she had to respect that. "You know how you always get annoyed when people don't know about plants? I get that. But what I'm trying to teach you is a life skill. I don't want you to be in a situation and you hesitate, because that's life or death, right there."

"All right, I want to argue against that – for one, you need that plant knowledge now you're hanging out with Jake, do you not? When would I need this? When am I going to be in a 'life or death' situation?"

"In a circumstance where you can't hide behind me!"

"Oh for Eywa's sakes, that's not going to happen – "

"It actually probably will, Grace!" The words hung in the air like smog. They both took in one another's words, and the reality hit them hard – Neytiri was realising that Grace expected protection if it came to that, and Grace was realising it wasn't going to be there. The wind felt strangely colder than it had several seconds ago. Swallowing, she continued, looking out towards the horizon. Even the sight of Polyphemus didn't end her concern. "If one of my plans happens, I'm not going to be in the shack for a few hours. If anything happens, you need to know this. If you're under, and they come, you need to fight back. And I'm sorry, words aren't going to cut it."

Grace put the gun on the grass, and put her hands on her hips, eyeing her friend. It was as if the cold air had gotten to her vocal chords as she asked icily, "Lemme guess – you're not going to tell me what this plan is, are you?"

Neytiri bit her upper lip.

Grace threw her hands up in exasperation. "Jesus Christ, Neytiri – you see, *this* ! *This* is your problem!" she exclaimed. Neytiri turned

her brown eyes onto her, seeing the fury intermingled with fear and hurt in her face. "No one knows your plan until you've already decided it. You know, Tsu'tei had a point a few hours ago – 'When are we going to fight?' You said it wasn't happening and yet now you're telling me that if someone comes to get me, I shoot? Pick a method and stick with it, dammit! And what about how you knew for *weeks* about Colonel Claw-face and Head Administrator Shithead's plan and you never told me?"

There it is, Neytiri thought, clamping her teeth together. She felt her body grow rigid in anger. "So. You are still pissed about that."

Grace was breathing hard. "I'm pissed about the fact that no one – literally *no one* ," she began hotly, "knows your plans. Ever. You have a shut off switch and you turn it off at the best moment for you."

" I have 'a shut off switch'? *I* do?" she countered. "You weren't exactly forthcoming with N'deh, were you?"

"That's a completely different area."

"How? How, Grace? I ask you that! You keep things from me, I keep things from you. Or we did. We did it to protect the other, either physically or emotionally, and that's what I'm doing now! You are just as guilty as I am!" If Neytiri had been a writer, she would have struggled to explain how she felt to a reader at that moment. 'Anger' didn't even begin to cover it. In fact, she was fairly certain English didn't have a word to fully encompass how she felt at that moment, and she was completely certain Na'vi didn't. This kind of anger was, supposedly, not known by them. She felt as though her bones themselves were shaking with the antagonism she was sensing. Breathing out, she did her best to compose herself. "You know, I have about a million ways this could go. Or to be completely honest, I have maybe six or seven ways of going about this. You're confused on exactly what's happening? Come into my mind, I invite you! I don't know whether to go Plan A, because that could fail and cause deaths, or perhaps combine A and C, but if that fails destruction happens, or maybe even there's a Plan K I didn't really know about

and I'll only think about it as Plan E is happening – honestly Grace, I don't say plans because I don't want to light the fire and then piss all over it."

"You're a closed book, Neytiri. I honestly often have no idea how to read you! You act one way and then you act another that completely contradicts the first and I just – "

"So what, you're annoyed because you can't fit me to a particular stereotype?"

"No! Jesus, that's not what I'm saying. Just… you know what," Grace growled, putting her hands up and leaning down to pick up the gun again. She began to walk past Neytiri, saying, "This conversation became irrelevant the moment it began."

Feeling the cold air swirling around her, with the bone-chilling screech of a *toruk* in the distance, Neytiri felt more alone than she had when she came to Pandora.

• • •

Humans were dreadful beings. Mo'at had figured that out very quickly. If it could burn, they burned it; if it could die, they killed it. She'd seen some of them burn the forest purely for the fun of it. " *They would burn the lake if they could* ," her mate had said, crinkling his nose in disgust. She knew he was right.

She never expected to have one of those beings as her sister.

Yet Grace never embodied the common traits of those beasts. She was gentle. She was kind. Her name even meant such things. But she also knew how to hold her own, and that was what earned her respect from the *tsahík.* One needed it in the Tsan'ten family.

She sat in one of the small rooms, on a large low hanging branch of the tree. Almost like a window, she sat on the sill of it, looking down onto the world below through the leaves. As she relaxed, and since

she was alone, she dangled one of her elegant legs out, feeling more content than she had the past few days. Down below the field sang with the song of staves. The thick, long weapons made from a very dense wood clashed together. The Na'vi would never kill one another, but they would fight, and these were often extremely brutal. Mo'at had never taken a proper interest in fighting, but her sons had, and it was her eldest she watched as he practised with one of the hunters. Surrounding him were his brother and many other warriors. They were selecting the members to help with the espionage Neytiri had requested. For what had obviously started as a basic sparring had gotten more eager, and Tzu'khan's hits were well-aimed and hard. His opponent, Ta'em, stumbled backward, defending himself clumsily. As he raised the long weapon, the prince ducked and swept the weapon at his feet, knocking him to the floor with little effort. Mo'at grimaced as he hit the mud with a *slap!* She pricked her ears up, straining to hear what they were saying once Ta'em was helped up, but for all her effort she only got the magnified voice of the person she had just been thinking of. " *Am I interrupting?* " Grace asked from the entrance, touching her fingers to her forehead and saying, " *I see you.* "

" *I see you* ," she confirmed, before adding, " *No, not at all,* " beckoning her in and sitting up straighter. Grace came to sit across from her, but unlike her sister-in-law, didn't dare to place her leg in such a manner; the threat of falling was all too real for her.

" *You have that look* ," Mo'at said after several moments of silence between them. They had just been watching down below, and they both kept their eyes on the arena as they spoke.

" *What look?* "

" *The look that something's troubling you. I've known you for a long time. I know when something is heavy on your mind.* "

" *Sisters always do, don't they?* "

" *Precisely.* " Ja'kanhe was now in the centre, sparring with one of the women. She was very good, alternating between fast and slow jabs, surprising the opponent. And she was extremely light on her feet, thus she was chosen.

" *I don't know. It seems juvenile.* "

" *If it's making you make that face, it's clearly not. What's wrong?"*

Grace watched the next warrior come into the circle. Ja'kanhe and he both bowed, before they began to square off. " *N'deh won't speak to me.* " Mo'at didn't act as if she'd offered a revelation. " *Hasn't since I told him.* "

She originally had the thought to tell her, 'Give him time', but one look at Grace's face and she knew that wouldn't cut it. She sighed, and looked at her. " *You mated a tough one* ." Grace gave a snort of laughter. " *He can be hard to read at the best of times.* "

" *You all took it better than he did.* "

" *It was probably just the shock of it. He didn't take you leaving very well. The day we had to let you go, he had a huge argument with Eytukan and told him that if we didn't let you back, he wouldn't lose just a sister, but a brother, too.* " That was obviously new information to Grace, whose expression looked as if she had been shot in the side. " *You didn't know? Of course he was absolutely upset. We tried to reason with him, and eventually he calmed, once he realised he could still go and visit you.* " Mo'at looked at her softly. " *It took a lot out of him. This will pass. Your mateship has been through worse.* "

Grace meekly blinked. " *You're right.* " She huffed. " *Men.* "

Mo'at gave a flicker of a smile. " *Tell me about it. They're trouble. Sometimes I wonder if they're worth it.* "

" *Come up with an answer?* "

" *They're good for one thing and that's about it.* "

They caught each other's eye, and began to laugh. Their tails flicked as they enjoyed their little laugh, the two of them not even paying attention to the show below now as they chortled together, the Avatar healer and the Na'vi queen. *What an unconventional pair we are* , Mo'at thought. Most reeled back when she said that they were sisters. But it suited them well. She was glad to have her in the family – she helped to balance them out, especially N'deh. She knew how to draw him out of his shell. If it weren't for her, he would have been a very different person, and they all knew it. " *I'm not too surprised over N'deh. Admittedly, I saw you doing this to him,* " she said suddenly, feeling the moment was there. " *Everyone knew you mated down.* "

Grace had to let the words linger there in the air for a moment. Mo'at had let her eyes pass back to her sons below whilst she tried to be sure of what she had said. She felt some grim satisfaction in the correction. She said, " *You mean N'deh mated down* ."

" *Eywa no, my sister – everyone knows you were far more suited for someone better. Being Eytukan's younger brother does not make up for lack of character. Here you came in, on your first day at the clan, with such an air of knowledge around you. Such confidence. I barely smelt nervousness from you.* (" *It was there, believe me* ," Grace interjected.) *Well, maybe, but there he was, effectively cowering in a corner from the threat of your kind. He was so jumpy around you for such a long time. I couldn't imagine what you saw in him!* "

As she sat there, looking at the *tsahík* who focused back on her boys, bewilderment seized her. A sudden guilt gripped her as she thought about what she had been thinking of them before returning to the clan. Had their time apart hardened her and subconsciously turned her against them? Neytiri gained a very biased view of the leaders through her before she met them. Here she had been acting so prim and proper after being wrenched away, and now she was candidly discussing her marriage trials with her sister-in-law as if the last year hadn't happened. Surely it was possible that she had

traded misery for infuriation simply because it was an easier emotion to deal with? That had changed in an instant when she stepped foot into Hometree. What had N'deh said to her when she stressed over meeting her siblings-in-law again just a few weeks before? 'You know Eytukan'. And even more so, she knew Mo'at. Dread crept in. Was she no better than the ones she was against by creating an imaginary ideal of what was reality? She felt sick.

When Mo'at didn't elaborate, Grace looked back down to Ja'kanhe and Tzu'khan. Two anchors in the sea of her thoughts. A smile flickered across her face as she saw them laughing together. *I do wonder what brought that on* , she thought curiously, but she could only be glad for it.

Mo'at leaned forward to her now, and Grace bent her head down to hear what she was saying. " *Do you realise this is the first time you and I have properly spoken since you've returned?* " Before she could respond, she continued: " *Grace… I will probably never be able to make up to you our lost time. None of us will be able to. I hope you understand that we didn't do it out of spite. We didn't do it – well, we didn't do it to purposefully hurt you; that was never our intention. We just had to put Tzu'khan first and we know now that we made a mistake in how we went about it.* " Mo'at sighed, looking down. She wanted Grace to understand. " *I mean* – "

A five-fingered hand was placed on her own. " *I know, Mo'at. I've known for a while. It was painful, yes, but I can understand, especially now that I'm home.* "

Relief washed over the *tsahíks* face. " *Good.* "

With the water under the bridge, they heard Tzu'khan call, " *That's it for today, everyone! We start in the morning.* " Mo'at had spoken with her mate and decided the best way to go about it was to explain to the clan within three days, once they had sorted out how to phrase it. They had both decided to speak to Neytiri that night and get a better idea of how to go about it. As she watched her sons, especially with how jovial Tzu'khan was once more, her heart swelled with a special

happiness mothers had. They had it when they knew that their babies were happy, and watching Ja'kanhe and Tzu'khan talking again brought such a joy to her she thought her heart might implode.

" *Our boys* ," Mo'at said and Grace was sure she had misheard properly this time.

" *Your boys.* "

" *I know what comes out of my own mouth. You raised them just as much as I did.* "

Grace was speechless. She often found herself in awe of her sister and perhaps that was where the illusion of her had come from: she never could pinpoint or guess exactly what she was going to say, so she her ideas of her were often flawed. *Jesus, who does that remind you of?* she suddenly thought, but she pushed it aside. She didn't want to think of her right now, as hard as that was. In another world, Mo'at and Neytiri could have been mother and daughter for how similar they were, in her mind anyway.

Mo'at's lips turned down, as the happiness in her heart turned to extreme concern. The boys had walked out of their line of sight to go into Hometree, and at the sight she was hit with such a strange premonition. It wasn't a powerful one, so she knew it wasn't from Eywa herself. She felt it in her bones rather than her mind. Yet it was enough for her tail to stiffen and for her to say, " *We have to protect them . More than anyone else.* "

" *We will* ," Grace replied without hesitation. " *At any cost, they will be fine.* "

The look in her eyes conveyed the certainty she could only hope she was feeling. But the sight of it gave Mo'at hope, and she smiled gratefully at her sister. They reached around each other for a hug, and with it, Grace felt an odd liberation from her own head.

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Tsu'tei was none too pleased over the events thus far. One look at her and everyone knew it: the way she held herself, in a stiff posture, to the way she walked, with hard footfalls, even her tail, which was constantly rigid, she made no secret of her mood. And as usual, Ja'kanhe just ignored it.

Fuming over the meeting, she was stalking down within one of the upper levels of Hometree when she went past a sight that made her stop. Inside of the alcoves was Zuleika. Clearly she thought she was alone and hidden from view by the curve of the wood that made the entrance, but Tsu'tei saw as clear as day. She'd never seen the leader without her war paint, and she nearly keeled over when she realised why. Instead of smooth, unblemished cyan skin, there were marred scars, running in almost claw-like marks along her back. It was as if a *palulukan* had tackled her to the floor and dug its claws in over and over again. And then her skin itself wasn't even in texture in a disgusting manner, coming up in bumps and looking like what the flesh of *riti* did when it was boiled.

She wasn't sure who was more shocked, her or Zuleika when they caught each other's eye. It was shocking to see her face, where a deep curved scar sat underneath her cheek, as if someone had plunged a knife in and dragged it across. Before Tsu'tei had stood, transfixed at the sight and now she was quickly looking for an exit. It was a startling sight, and she didn't know whether to scream or throw up. She breathed out, trying to settle. " *I – I'm sorry* ," she stammered, backing away and keeping her eyes down. " *I was coming up to…* " What did she say? Get away from Ja'kanhe and Neycole? It didn't sound very good.

But Zuleika breathed, the initial shock wearing off, and turned around. The scars were on her front, too, but not as obvious. " *It's… it's fine.* " She calmed and gave a true smile, and beckoned Tsu'tei in. " *You came up here to avoid everyone, didn't you?* "

" *Is it obvious?* " she queried, dipping her head and coming in, sitting on the floor.

Zuleika lowered herself to the floor as well. By her knee was a wooden bowl, filled with a type of waxy paste. She dipped a finger into it to stir, which gave a strange sweet yet sour scent, and began to rub it on her shoulders. " *Honestly, I can go* ," Tsu'tei offered, feeling she was witnessing something very private and feeling quite uncomfortable, but Zuleika said, " *Nonsense. Besides, this means I can talk to you.* "

" *About what?* " she asked hesitantly.

" *Your remarkable level of hated towards Neytiri.* " When Tsu'tei stiffened, the leader smiled. " *Come now, this isn't a case of me stirring up drama, this is me trying to prevent it. You can't forget that a clan at war within itself will never win a war against someone else.* "

" *We're not in a war* ," Tsu'tei quickly said, though she wasn't sure if it was for Zuleika's benefit or for her own. She looked at her face as the woman put the substance over her skin there, and then sighed. " *He likes her more than me. I can tell.* "

Zuleika finished spreading the substance on her face – it was a powdered root mixed with a type of flour, Tsu'tei had guessed – and now concentrated on her back. " *I don't think that's true* ," the leader said, giving her a warm smile. " *How old are you, Tsu'tei?* "

" *Seventeen.* " She hesitated, her eyes narrowing. " *How old are you?* "

" *Twenty-eight. So I'm older and you can trust me on what I say, as I've been around a good deal longer than you. Does he talk to you?* "

" *Barely.* "

" *Does he acknowledge you're there?* "

" *No.* " Tsu'tei wasn't sure what to make of this conversation. She frowned. " *Why are you asking me this?* "

" *Perhaps the reason he's exasperated with you is because you don't listen – Neytiri does. I already told you I'm trying to prevent forthcoming issues.* "

Tsu'tei opened her mouth to retort, but thought better of it, and shut it again. She flicked her tail along the ground, looking pouty. She rested her head in the cup of her hands. " *I don't want to talk about him.* "

" *Great. We can talk about her, then.* " In the time they had spoken, Tsu'tei realised the wax had finished, and it was now drying on her skin. The most amazing thing was happening before her eyes – it filled in the gaps left by the gouges, and her skin was practically naturally smooth. She was glad for it – she had felt a queasiness seeing such a thing. Zuleika stood up to cross to the other end of the room, and came back with two other bowls – one with red paint, the other with white. Expertly, she began to dab it on rather than glide it on, painting the forms she usually had.

There was silence between them, and Tsu'tei realised she was the one who was meant to speak. " *She came into this clan acting like she knew everything* ," she muttered. " *Ja'kanhe was given the task of looking after her, you should have seen his face – it was as if it was the best day of his life. I don't understand why. She's not great, she's not pretty.* " She made a face. " *Well I don't think she is. And that name he gave her… 'Neytiri'.* " She sneered out the syllables of it.

By this time, Zuleika had quickly worked and finished putting on the paint on her chest and now worked on her face. " *You shouldn't speak of her so negatively. She'd be flattered by it.* " When Tsu'tei appeared thoroughly confused, " *To be in someone's mind is to have power over them. She could revel in the fact that you subconsciously reserve thoughts and energy for her.* "

Tsu'tei blinked spastically. " *But she can't read my thoughts.* "

" *She can read your body language and if you put as much work into your dramatics as you did to actually helping her, you might find your life becomes all the better for it.* "

" *So what are you suggesting?* "

Zuleika began to outline the red shape on her in the white. " *Let it go, is what I'm suggesting.* " She paused for a moment. " *We have far more problems to worry about. But something tells me you're one of those people who focuses on a problem until it's fixed, which is an issue. You can cause more problems than you solve, as much as you think you're helping. You're probably just there to be there.* "

Tsu'tei honestly didn't know if this was the most illuminating conversation she'd ever had, the most insulting, both or neither. She honestly stood gaping at Zuleika, just at a loss of what to say. She stood deftly up, grinding her teeth as she looked at her. " *I am not just there to be there* ," she snarled.

" *Good. So what are you there for?* " When no answer came to her lips, Zuleika continued: " *You will be Ja'kanhe's mate, and in turn, the tsahík. Your job is to make sure everything runs smoothly. And right now, your little nemesis is doing a better job of that than you. So I suggest you either let it go, or deal with it head on. Confront Ja'kanhe and tell him exactly how you feel. In a particular way.* "

" *Fine. Seeing as you seem to know so much about this, what do I do?* "

Zuleika finished putting the paint on her face, and she looked somehow even more formidable than she had moments ago. She looked up at Tsu'tei. " *You will never be with Ja'kanhe unless you establish that you're equals, if not you're better. You're not a man. Don't be a man – be a woman. It's a powerful weapon when used correctly. Understand?* "

She was still frowning as she looked at the war painted leader next to her. " *Yes?* " she said hesitantly. Zuleika smiled. Tsu'tei paused for

a moment before asking, " *Zuleika, if I may – what caused…?* " Her eyes flickered over the drying paint, which now covered the disfiguring scars.

But the leader only gave a smile, and stood up herself. " *Don't.* " With a meaningful look at Tsu'tei, she dismissed her, leaving the poor young girl wondering if she had even more questions than before. Yet those words continued to echo in her mind. *You're not a man. Don't be a man – be a woman. It's a powerful weapon when used correctly.*

Yes, it was. And she slowly began to feel rather delighted as a plan of her own began to form.

Chapter Twelve

I think I just broke a personal record for fastest ever update. I wanted to wait a little bit longer but I couldn't resist. Please do review guys, I do want to hear what you as readers think (and if you have any theories of what you think will happen, that might be interesting to read!).

Chapter Twelve

The next few days passed uneventfully. Grace and Neytiri didn't speak to one another unless they had to, and often it was just a case of asking one another to pass food or drink during meals. Their spat was untimely, as the days that went by brought a closer step to whatever was to happen. Grace was slowly realising that she and Neytiri were more similar than she thought, and whilst they did get along, sometimes it was just a case of their bold personalities overlapping in just the wrong way.

True to her word, Neytiri had managed to obtain several tiny microphones and speakers, using Trudy as the one who brought it to her for the reason that Grace and her needed to communicate when they were at opposite sides of the mountain. "Why do you need seven of these anyhow?" Trudy asked as she handed them over into her open palm. "There's only two of you."

"In case anything breaks." Using a lie to her advantage and since she was still annoyed at Grace: "You know how Grace is – anything military, she wants to snap in two and I don't want to take that risk."

Trudy laughed and let it go, having to head back to RDA for more tasks, and it was just as well, for about ten minutes later, N'deh's *ikran* (it was the first time Neytiri had ever met the creature, which shimmered in hues of red and gold), landed, and asked not just for the microphones, but for the camera as well. Finding it strange but not in the mood to ask questions, Neytiri handed both over.

That night, she passed the microphones around to Ja'kanhe, herself, Eytukan, and four other warriors who had been chosen from the Omaticaya. Tihawnu and Zuleika had brought fifty warriors with them, apiece, and they would be intermixed with the next round from the Omaticaya. It would be a rotational method, and Tzu'khan and his troop were up first; Eytukan and her would be standing by, hearing what was being said. Yet even through all their planning, and all the ideas for what they would do to defend themselves, the leaders still insisted on them maintaining some regularity in the clan life. Neytiri readily agreed, but perhaps her agreement wouldn't have come so eagerly once a hunting festival was what was decided upon.

"The *talioang* come through clan this time," Jake excitedly explained to her early that morning it was to happen. Neytiri had been slowly planning out one of her ideas, only to grow frustrated when she realised that in order for her to achieve that particular one, she would have to get inside RDA and hijack the system. She didn't have a hope in hell of trying, and whilst Grace was smart, hacking into computers was not their strong suit. Seeing how tense she was, Jake came to place his hands on her shoulders where she sat on the floor, leaves with potential drawings of plans spread around her. "Neytiri," he cajoled, his tail seeking her own and curling around it, "leave this. Just tonight."

She sighed, tossing one of the leaves to the side. "Well I just figured out that my original plan won't work, so that's a bust."

"What was it?"

She brushed it off, not wanting to get into the whole explanation now. It was confusing enough in her own mind. She looked up into his face, seeing concern in his eyes. "I cannot stop, my Jake," she said, trying to not put her stresses on him. "I need to try and sort this out."

"And you will." He squeezed her bare shoulders before coming to sit across from her, looking at her worriedly. "But you never seen hunting festival before. This will be an experience."

"There will be other hunts."

"All right – before we begin spying, this will bring good luck."

She gave a throaty laugh. "Eywa, that's a new statement! Look, I might need to skip this one – "

"It is a teaching method, I say so."

A small smile flitted across her face. She leaned forward and whispered, "I thought I was in charge now?"

"You are. Please," he added, sounding like he was almost begging. "I want you to see."

She looked at his face, his handsome face with his shining golden eyes. She huffed. "That fucking face, I swear to God," she muttered, pushing the leaves aside. He grinned, and when she turned her head back to him, he quickly leaned in and kissed her. "Mmm, what if someone walks in?" she asked, her five fingered hand spreading across his chest as she edged him away.

"It is why I made it quick," Jake said, standing to his feet and offering a hand to her. She stood with him. "Wear something bright tonight. Bring good luck."

"Why do I only hear of these traditions as they happen?" she called, but Jake had already left the alcove. She supposed she had little choice, though as she looked in dismay at the plans spread about her, she sighed. One night couldn't be too bad. And it was true, they were starting the next day – why not have a little bit of fun the night before? Shaking out her hair, she pinned it back in a half-up do, securing with a piece of twine and decorating it few yellow dried flower petals, and then went to the little alcove that housed all the clothing. Picking through it, she looked at a top that when she first came to the clan, she would have run the other direction from. It was a beautiful formal adornment with a vine-like structure in a gorgeous colour of copper. Bright enough, she was sure. It wouldn't do much

in the way of actual protection, or holding her breasts properly. Yet she had found that through her time with the Omaticaya, she wasn't nearly as straitlaced as she once was.

As she tightened it behind her back, she reassured herself it would be fine. *Yeah, you'll be fine. One night off and then you can get back to it.* Perhaps having a chance to clear her head would do her some good, as perhaps then a plan would properly come to her.

The blue of the day sky slowly transfigured into purple evening hues as the day began to end. The sound of the forest calmed her down, and she felt a swelling of her heart as she headed down the stairs to the ground. The warmth felt like it would burst out of her chest. *I will protect you at any cost* , she thought. *I will not let them destroy my home.* And she felt a steely determination more than ever as she looked at the clan setting up for the festival, lighting the massive bonfires in the centre of the ground floor, others trying on masks and dancing clothes for the festivities. *I will not let them destroy you.*

• • •

The sounds of drums and horns swirled up into the night. The festival was in full swing. It was a veritable feast with music, dancing and lots of *talioang* steaks. The huge bonfires illuminated the happy faces of the clan members. A few of the Na'vi were already drunk on the fermented juices of the forest or the fermented mare's milk that Tihawnu's tribe had brought with them, but Neytiri knew she needed her wits about her tomorrow, so she kept well away.

"Neytiri!" She had been watching some of the dancing the Na'vi were doing. The movements were expressive and emotional, and sinuous movements a celebration of the body, a celebration of life, movement, breath. It was a spectacular spectacle, as their bioluminescent body lights appeared, bringing another beautiful element to the already beautiful dance. Yet she, who always felt she had two left feet, was glad for the distraction as Jake was part of the activity. He kept eyeing her and tilting his head to try and get her to join in, yet she was certain she had been born with two left feet, so

she kept well away, glad for someone summoning her. She wasn't prepared for who brought the distraction – Mo'at.

The *tsahík* was sitting with her mate and eldest son, and she beckoned the Avatar over to them. Tzu'khan smiled at her as she hesitantly sat down, suddenly feeling way out of her depth to sit with the leaders. As she settled onto the floor, keeping her back straight and her tail curled neatly around her knees, she wondered why they had brought her over. "You look troubled," Mo'at explained.

"Oh, no, my *tsahík* ," she smiled, "just enjoying the festivities. I've never been to one before, of course."

Eytukan beamed at her – it was different seeing him smiling so, and it made her happy to see it – and said something so quickly, even if she knew Na'vi through and through, she didn't think she would have been able to keep up. "My father ask if you will dance?" Tzu'khan translated.

She flicked her eyes to the young prince, still unsure how to take him, before to the leader. "My *olo'eyktan* , I would be an embarrassment to my original species if I tried."

Mo'at gave a snort of laughter and translated, and the Tsan'tens laughed with her. They all cast their eyes back to the dancing, and even within all the movement, Neytiri could spy Jake as easily as spotting a lone cloud in the blue sky. The dancing they were doing sometimes involved partners and a sudden interchanging of them with a change of the beat, and she realised with a sudden shock that Jake was suddenly dancing with Tsu'tei. The young girl had gone all out tonight to look eye-catching, and despite their general distaste for one another, Neytiri had to admire the way she had slightly curled her hair to frame her face, and the pretty green woven top she wore. Jake noticeably stiffened when he came into contact with her, and relaxed when he was matched up with another woman.

" *Well that was a little bit too obvious for my liking* ," Eytukan murmured to his mate, keeping the smile on his face but his tone

was dark.

Mo'at sighed, feeling an edginess creep back into her, but she, like her mate, kept her smile on. *No need for Neytiri to be part of this conversation* , she thought, whilst she said to her mate, " *I don't want to say I told you so…* "

" *No, no, you did. I should have listened. This is quite concerning.* "

" *Mother, father, keep talking with those strange smiles on your faces and you will scare our guest,* " Tzu'khan warned with the same fake smile. They all looked back to Neytiri, and Mo'at smiled and shook her head in a very human fashion – it didn't concern the Avatar.

The other Avatar hovered around the sidelines, watching the festivities. Grace's eyes flickered over the members, smiling and talking to those who spoke to her, and smiling at Zuleika when the two caught each other's eye from across the area. " *She still has high respect for you, you know* ."

N'deh had appeared out of the darkness by her side. He was much closer to her than she realised, so when she turned around and saw him right by her, she gave a yelp which startled some of the members around them. "Jesus Christ!" she exclaimed, putting her hand to her heart to try and catch her breath. " *You scared me!* "

His ears went back, and he looked genuinely apologetic for it. His tail hung low as he said, " *I'm sorry.* "

She had the feeling he was apologising for something else, too. Her eyes reduced to slits. " *Mo'at spoke to you, didn't she?* "

" *Huh? What are you speaking of?* "

" *Never mind* ," she quickly said, knowing N'deh didn't lie. He didn't know how to lie. She relaxed her face and looked at him. " *I see you.* "

" *I see you* ." His hand sought hers out, with ease entwining his four fingers around her five. They'd learnt how to do that quickly. His eyes reflected his feelings, she could tell – sorrow, worry, and as always present, love. She was glad to still see that. " *I'm sorry* ," he repeated. " *I shouldn't have reacted how I did.* "

She sighed, blinking. " *It's all right* ," she said, though she wasn't going to say sorry. She didn't have anything to say sorry for. If she wasn't going to help, then she would, but he ought to have known her better than that. She just leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his cheek, letting her other hand cup his face softly. " *I was worried about you for a while there. Really worried. I didn't know if… well, I just didn't know.* "

He seemed to understand what she was saying, and he turned them around to face the dancing. His arm wrapped now around her middle, pulling her closer to him. " *I'm here. And I support you, whatever happens. If these are our days numbered, I want to spend them with you.* " She gave him a wavering smile. As his hand kept around hers, his body lights came into view, as did hers – they were exactly the same, the small dots placed around their faces, their bodies, in exactly the same pattern. They belonged to one another. He leaned in to press a kiss to her forehead. " *I love you, Grace. That will never change.* "

" *And I love you, N'deh.* "

Now he smiled – almost smirked – as he requested, " *So let us dance to be sure of it!* "

" *Whoa, no, no!* " She exclaimed as he began to drag her to the dance floor. She dug her knees into the ground and struck her tail straight out for balance, trying to prevent him from taking her. " *I'm a scientist, not a dancer!* "

" *What's wrong with being both?* " he asked innocently as he dragged them into the midst of the other dancers.

Neytiri nearly doubled over laughing when she saw Grace trying to move with the other Na'vi, but she caught herself for two reasons – to be honest, as she watched the scene, Grace did move quite well, considering. Her body was almost as fluid as the other dancers, just a little more hesitant, though it couldn't be held against her – they'd been raised this way; she had not. Yet she also recalled their argument, and the laugh caught in her throat and didn't budge.

The song that had been playing ended, and within a few seconds a new beat began and about twenty people rushed in to dance in a circle. One of them rushed out, and towards them. Jake, breathless, his cheeks flushed to a purple colouration, fire dancing in his eyes, came up to his family and Neytiri, stretching out a five-fingered hand. "You must dance!" he said breathlessly, a smile on her face. As she tried to tug her hand away, he gave a pleading look. "It is the way."

She could feel the Tsan'tens' eyes on her. Mo'at was especially focused as she said sternly, "If the girl does not wish to dance, do not force. Men should never force."

Jake smiled at his mother. "I am not forcing – I am offering. Neytiri?" His eyes went back to her. The deciding factor was when she glanced over his shoulder and spied Tsu'tei watching them. She seemed to hold a look of smugness as Neytiri tried to refuse to dance, and that was enough to solidify her decision. She elegantly stood, as regal as a princess, and, smiling, followed him onto the dance floor. Tsu'tei's smile was wiped clean off. *Take that, bitch,* Neytiri thought haughtily.

Mo'at noticed Tzu'khan's eyes raking the floor, and he said in surprise, " *Grace is dancing.* "

This was the first time she'd heard him speak his aunt's name without a touch of malice within it. She arched an eyeridge, and eventually agreed, " *Yes, I suppose she is.* "

He seemed to debate with himself for a moment, his eyes darting from the dancers to the wooden bowl in his hands and back again.

His tail flickered nervously, before he put the bowl down and rose to his feet. " *I'll be back* ," he told his parents. Mo'at exchanged glances with Eytukan, and her mate sighed, brushing it off.

The dancers walked three steps in to the beat, and then three steps back out, and then in again, their hips swaying to the beat. When they came back in, their hands entwined with their partners, moving around together. As Grace was spun by her mate, she was shocked to see Neytiri pulled over by Ja'kanhe, laughing as she shed civilisation and inhibition, letting herself go and dancing wild and free with the Na'vi people. Despite herself, Grace couldn't help but look with approval at the young woman. *You've grown so much in such a little time* , she had to admit. N'deh followed her gaze, and his expression mirrored her own, before it disappeared. " *May I?* " Tzu'khan asked, coming to stand next to the dancing pair.

Grace exchanged shocked looks with N'deh, her eyes widening. Eventually, her mate let her go, squeezing her hand before stepping aside, and Tzu'khan took his place. Her heart hammered in her chest, and not from the exertion of dancing. Her tail stiffened, and it didn't help as he said, " *Relax, I just wanted to talk* ."

The music was slowing to a smoother, calmer beat, and they shuffled around awkwardly on the dance floor. He was leading, but she was barely taking notice, her feet feeling like boulders had been tied to them. " *Wha – what are you doing?* " she asked, a little more harshly than she intended.

Her nephew's face held a look she couldn't read – she could only assume it was something along the lines of regret. 'Regret'? No, surely she had read that wrong. " *I don't know* ," he admitted quietly, and she had to rely on reading his lips to know what he said as the music was horribly loud.

He spun her, but she barely made the proper move, coming back to him and saying, " *What's going on? You haven't said 'boo' to me for over a year. And when you did, you –* "

" *I know what I did* ," he said, gritting his teeth. She noticed his eyes flicking over the cheek; the bruise had lifted a long time ago. " *It was wrong. It really was. It was never your fault and I never should have done or said anything against you.* " He stopped moving, and let her go. His ears went back. " *I don't know what I can say. I don't know what I can do. But I can swear to you – for as long as I live, I will do my fucking hardest to make it up to you. I'm truly sorry.* " He hesitated, and his lips turned up one side in a type of crooked smile. " *Mother.* "

She felt tears stinging her eyes. She bit her lip, and ever so slowly, she said, " *As your mother, I must condemn you for the curse word.* " He gave a musical laugh, the one she had missed so much. She laughed along – out of joy and relief. " *I did miss you, Tzu'khan. And yes, your actions weren't the best, but I can understand.* " She squeezed his hand in her own. *I can remember when your hand fit just in my palm* , she thought to herself, feeling herself grow more emotional. How did all that time go? She gave a smile to stop herself from having an overspill of emotions thanks to him. The Na'vi effect. " *Well, young Tsan'ten, you have a lot to make up for* ," she teased light-heartedly. " *I'm going to hold you to that.* " He smiled. A genuine smile. Just as he used to when he was little, and it melted all the ice in her heart. She felt an overwhelming sense of happiness. She could bet this was one of the best nights she'd had.

Neytiri's eyes flickered over to Grace, and her jaw dropped. Jake followed her gaze, but he didn't seem as shocked to see Tzu'khan and Grace hugging. The sight couldn't have looked stranger than if a *palulukan* had merely walked up to a *pa'li* and just said 'Hello'. "What the hell just happened?" she asked as he spun her. Her eyes never left her mentor and her lover's brother.

"I think Tzu'khan realise he in the wrong," Jake said simply, sounding as wise as his father.

She dragged her eyes away from the duo. "How do you know?" she asked of Jake.

He blinked. "He spoke to me. A few days ago. We talked issues out. He much better now. And I believe Grace, too."

She could hardly deny that. Grace looked happier than she ever had been, especially as N'deh came back to stand beside her. The trio spoke before Tzu'khan left the mated pair to dance. There was no strain on their faces, only smiles; it wasn't for show. *I suppose everything worked out for you,* Neytiri thought, and couldn't help but smile despite herself for her boss. Her friend.

"You look so beautiful," he murmured, and now her smile was for him. His finger gently traced her cheek. "Your lights match you perfectly."

"You're very kind, my Jake." She squeezed his hand briefly, before the song began to speed up and she didn't get the chance to tell him she found him very handsome, too.

The song ended, and with her feet killing from the sudden rapid fire movements towards the end, Neytiri excused herself from Ja'kanhe, discreetly brushing her tail against the back of his legs as she walked away. It wasn't as secretive as she had been aiming for. Tsu'tei watched from the side of the area, nursing a cup of the fermented mare's milk. It tasted pungent, and burned her throat on the way down, but it gave her some courage. The other courage she sought from Zuleika, who was happily chatting with three of the Omaticaya men, who seemed enraptured with every word she spoke. *If she can do it, so can I,* she thought to herself. *Don't be a man – be a woman. Be a woman. Come on, you can do this.* She reached over to grab another wooden bowl of the liquid. Putting on a confident smile, she sauntered over to Ja'kanhe at the beginning of the next song. He was on the verge of walking off the dance floor when she caught up to him. " *Hello,* " she greeted in a jaunty tone.

His ears pricked up at the sound of it. " *Hello* ," he said in return, but not before there was a very obvious pause.

She smiled and passed him the cup of alcohol she hadn't drunk from; he took it after a few moments. " *I was thinking – why don't we go for a walk?* " she suggested. " *It's too hot in here with all the dancing.* "

His eyes were narrowed. He looked like he was on the verge of asking 'Why?' or perhaps saying, 'No, I'm fine to stay here, thank you.' But with a glance away from her, and then back, he blinked and followed her. She realised that he had looked over to his mother. *At least she's on my side* , Tsu'tei thought, which was more than Neytiri could say. As they walked out of the room, that was exactly whose eyes followed them, watching their hands together and feeling an internal shiver.

The evening air was cool and crisp. As they walked outside, their feet gently padding along the moss, Tsu'tei took a deep breath of the air, tasting the essence of the forest on her tongue. She looked up to the beautiful purple and blue sky above them. " *It's incredible, isn't it?* " she asked him as they strolled together.

" *It is,* " he agreed, focusing on his feet.

" *I hope we can protect all of it. How awful it would be to lose to them.* " His ears pricked, but he said nothing. She backtracked, realising she was about to go down a path that had been twisty for them in the past. " *When we are the leaders, we will have to do everything to protect our clan.* "

" *Yes* ."

" *You will be a good leader, Ja'kanhe. I know it.* "

His eyes came back up to hers, and he blinked. " *You are kind.* "

They continued their walk to the river, hearing the wind blowing softly across the water like someone blowing gently over soup, just enough to stir it. The meandering herd of *pa'li* were by the edge, and a shrill whicker caused the two of them to look over. The young filly bobbed

her head towards them, which elicited a smile from both of them. " *She grew well* ," Ja'kanhe observed, going over carefully and running his fingers over her nose. " *I remember when I picked her up. N'deh, Grace and Neytiri* – " Tsu'tei rolled her eyes behind him – " – *had just left the area. The poor little one lost her mother to those guns by their escort. So N'deh summoned me and I brought her home.* "

She watched as he delicately stroked the velvety muzzle. The foal's long tongue, used for dipping into flowers for the sweet nectar inside, struck out and coiled around Ja'kanhe's outstretched wrist, making them laugh. " *No, no, baby, that's not food* ," he murmured gently, pulling his wrist away.

It was easy for her to push aside negative thoughts as she watched her fiancé stroke the foal's face. " *You'll be a fine father one day* ," she told him. The alcohol was making her bolder than she had been before, and he realised it, turning to look at her skeptically. She smiled, looking up at him through her lashes.

" *Interesting compliment* ," he said wryly.

" *I only speak the truth,* " she said, slowly turning around, her tail sashaying in a curling motion. She could feel his eyes on her. *Perfect.* She walked towards the edge of the river where a fallen log covered in moss lay. She sat upon it, crossing her elongated legs and leaning back on her palms. *Be a woman.* " *Why don't you come and sit with me?* " He crossed over to do as she said, sitting beside her, though he left enough space to fit another person between them. " *I don't bite. You can sit closer* ," she told him, a certain huskiness to her voice. He hesitated again, before doing just that, but seemed to tense his leg muscles so much that there was still a hair width of space between their legs. She supposed it was the best she'd get. For now. " *There! Isn't that better?* "

He mumbled something that sounded like 'I suppose so' and then proceeded to focus his eyes everywhere but her. He took a sip of the

alcohol of the Horse Clan, and his eyes widened. " *It's not that great, is it?* " Tsu'tei tried. " *I much prefer our own.* "

" *Actually, it's better than I thought,* " he admitted.

" *Well, it is nice* ," she quickly said. She continued to lean back on her palms, just watching him. " *Are you stressed about tomorrow?* "

He glanced over at her, and she realised that his eyes weren't as hard and cold as they had been just moments before. " *A little* ," he admitted. He sighed. " *I hope she's right.* "

So he doubts , she thought, feeling herself grow braver. " *Avatars aren't always right. After all, they have some human in them, and Eywa knows they aren't perfect.* "

Obviously the drink was stronger than either of them had realised – he didn't fight her on the statement now. " *Tsu'tei I don't know what to do* ," he murmured, looking at her. His eyes held the same look of being lost as a child without its mother in the forest. She felt her carnal mood begin to dissipate, taken over by something akin to apprehension for him. " *What if all this fails? What if we step wrong? Or what if she's completely misjudged the humans? What if…* " He trailed off, looking down at his bowl. " *I want to trust her and I do. But this is a huge risk.* "

" *Ja'kanhe. Look at me.* " The sultry voice had disappeared, and she straightened up, his eyes holding what she hoped was reassurance. She leaned forward and rested a hand on his forearm. He looked at her as she asked, and the usual look of loathing was vanquished from his irises. " *It will be all right. Really. We will fight this and we will win.* "

" *Do you really believe that? Really?* " He put the bowl down and looked at her seriously. " *We will be going up against… them, with all their weaponry, and we have bows and arrows. Look how that worked out last time. So I ask you again, do you really think we will win?* "

She gripped his arm a little tighter, her tail flicking to show her positivity. Though on the inside she had no idea. " *I have to* ," she could only murmur. " *Please be careful tomorrow. Don't do anything rash. We need you home safe, all of you.* "

" *I will be safe.* "

They both looked at one another. Tsu'tei could only hear her heart beat in her ear drums. It felt as if nothing else existed, like there was no other world outside the log they sat on, the ground their feet were placed on. The thinnest of smiles came on his face. " *This is the first time we've spoken without real antagonism.* "

She mirrored his expression. " *I guess so.* " She thought for a moment before saying, " *Shared fears warrant shared companionship.* "

" *That's clever. Where did you hear that?* "

She had to roll her eyes, and gave him a little nudge, making him laugh. " *I came up with it* , *thank you very much.* "

" *I know. You're a very intelligent girl.* "

" *That has to be the nicest thing you've ever said to me.* "

" *Well this has to be the nicest you've ever been to me. Can you keep it up?* "

They both shared another laugh. " *I'm sure I can manage that* ," she promised, entwining her fingers with his. He didn't resist. They were both smiling; every reference one of them made the other would get, every remark was a joke or a compliment, and Tsu'tei suddenly thought, *Flirting.* She felt hope flare in her heart, and her ears prick up. She looked at their hands together, their four fingers fitting as perfectly as a puzzle. There were no stray pieces that one had to worry of what they had missed. It was faultless. What was she trying

to express, anyway? The important thing she'd been planning to do when Ja'kanhe and her were alone – it was eluding her.

Carefully, she leant in, close to his face, just testing the water. Is this what it felt like, just before a first kiss? She never knew. Ja'kanhe was always meant to be her first so she never experienced it with anyone else. But, she reminded herself, he wouldn't have any experience either. She was tense, terrified – perhaps she couldn't go through with it. She could just back away, and pretend she leaned in to retrieve an eyelash off of his check. She was so close to him that she could see the shadow across his jawline, the slight circles of tiredness under his eyes. His face was handsome, dark and strong. He wasn't flinching whilst inside she was a nervous wreck. *Zuleika this was a terrible plan, I can't go through with this* , one part of her thought whilst the other egged her on, *Go on – be a woman. Be a woman for him.* She could feel his breath on her face. It smelt sweet, a faint remnant of the alcohol before.

And then the courage reignited within her, and she pushed her lips against his own.

The part that would always linger in her mind was that he didn't resist. Not at first. His lips were sealed for a moment, but then he began to kiss her back. Years afterward, Ja'kanhe would always kick himself for it. *He kissed her back.*

The moment he did, a part of him regretted it, but it was like lighting a fire and attempting to put it out immediately: it was easier said than done. Especially being a little more than tipsy between the two of them, putting out said fire was a clumsy affair. Her lips were soft as he expected, but they weren't as guided, as confident as Neytiri had been. She was almost slack, and their lips just didn't seem to work as well together. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. It was as if he were trapped but at the same time he couldn't pull away.

And then he realised why. *Neytiri.* As he kissed Tsu'tei – the woman who was meant to be his mate, the woman he was destined to

spend the rest of his life with, the woman he would have to lead with, have children with, wake up every morning to – he was imagining Neytiri. His mind was placing her face and body against him instead of the one actually kissing him. As her hands roamed over his chest, as their hips inched closer, as she touched his face, grazing against his neck… it wasn't her. It was Neytiri. The eye-opener hit into him, mortifying him. And Tsu'tei had no idea. He gave a rough laugh, and pulled away. " *Tsu'tei, I don't… I don't think this is a good idea* ," he told her as she pressed another kiss to his lips.

" *Why not?* " she asked, that throaty voice coming back again. Her hands slipped down south, and he tried to catch them before they did, but her lips now went to his neck, immobilising him as she undid his loin cloth.

Get out of here, get out of here! Go and find Neytiri! Just say her name and Tsu'tei will stop! But he couldn't. There was a part of him thinking that this wasn't really happening, that this was happening to someone else, someone he wasn't in control of. He certainly wasn't quite in control of himself. And it was happening so fast, as Tsu'tei pushed off the top she was wearing. And his quickly flicked his eyes to rest just at the base of her neck, just trying to extricate himself from this situation. The words, the actions he could have done to run away? They just weren't coming to him.

" *Do you like them?* " she asked him in that same flirtatious voice, and he didn't even need to look before thinking, *Neytiri's are larger.* It was a horrible thing to think. The Na'vi didn't generally find that part of the body overtly sensual, but with aesthetics he had to admit he preferred the Avatar's. He didn't know what to do. Technically, this was right – have sex with Tsu'tei, forget about Neytiri. *Forget about Neytiri.* By sleeping with her, he had effectively sealed the deal on complete and utter chaos. But for him and Tsu'tei to do this? This was their path, this was what they would be doing for the rest of their lives. He would have to forget about Neytiri for the rest of his life. The wedding was going to happen – it was postponed, not

abolished. It was going to happen, there was no getting out of it. Perhaps getting some practice in would help…

No, no it won't , he thought as she moved her hand down south again. It felt uncomfortable, ungainly – she didn't really know what she was doing and he knew he wouldn't be able to do anything. " *Tsu'tei this is… we should head back to the festival. What if someone comes over…?* "

She rested her forehead against his. " *No one will* ," she breathed. She was beautiful. She would be an ideal mate, he knew, but she just… *She's just not Neytiri.*

And it was these thoughts that weren't exactly helping. " *Someone's not really excited* ," Tsu'tei purred, her tail flicking.

" *Look, I really think we – what are you doing?* " he asked as she got off the log and onto her knees. He gasped. There was a time when he was much younger that Tzu'khan had explained such an act, and Ja'kanhe had been wary of whether to believe him, thinking he was just trying to boast about what Akwete could do. But now he guessed it was true. And she wasn't doing a very good job as her teeth scraped along him. *Neytiri would do this better* , a part of him thought though he had no idea if it would be true. His body had stiffened but not the part she had hoped. His thoughts were screaming at him, each with different arguments of whether to stay or whether to run. And it was all so complex that he barely knew he said it until he did:

" *I had sex with someone!* "

He had been so close to saying *I had sex with Neytiri* , and he truly dodged an arrow by avoiding that.

Tsu'tei gagged and pulled away, practically stumbling back so quickly she nearly fell into mud. She grabbed her top back, obscuring her bare chest. " *You tell me this* ," she growled, her voice sounding as dark as a thunderstorm and he was glad she had moved away, " *as I have your flaccid penis in my mouth?!* "

She practically shouted the last few words, and his ears shot back as he grabbed his loin cloth, telling her to hush. " *It wasn't completely soft* ," he muttered, feeling defensive.

" *Do not defend your erection to me right now!* " She slowly rose to her feet, feeling unsteady and she knew it wasn't due to the alcohol. Distress pulsed through her at an alarming rate. She wiped her mouth and breathed out slowly, unknowing how to feel. What to think. What to do.

" *I'm sorry* ," he whispered but she wasn't sure if he was sorry at all. How could he be when he had sex with someone else? There was silence between them as she put her top back on and he did up his loin cloth again. " *Is there anything you want to ask me?* "

" *No!* " she said so quickly, her words puncturing the air like a knife going through flesh. That was how she felt right now. She felt like someone was stabbing her over and over again. Her ears went down and she gave a shaky breath, before readjusting her statement. " *Maybe… Well. Is it someone I know?* "

She looked at him, needing to see the answer in his face as well as hear it in his voice. He swallowed. " *Yes* ," he murmured.

" *Oh, Eywa!* " she gasped, bending over and putting her hands on her knees to steady herself. " *That's it. That's it, I don't want to know anymore…* " She sounded on the verge of tears, and she probably was. That was a stupid question from the start, she knew. Of course it would have been someone she knew. He hadn't left the clan. Her body felt like it was riddled with bullet holes. Who could it have been? Maybe… No. No, she was far too prudish for that kind of thing. Humans wouldn't do that. She didn't even know how to look at him right now. She just walked over to the log and sank onto her haunches on the ground. She felt shattered, wrecked, destroyed. A lump was forming in her throat and she was breathing hard.

" *I'm sorry, Tsu'tei* ," he murmured above her. " *Genuinely.* " He slowly moved off the log, coming to sit beside her. This was now the

closest they'd ever sat together; his side was touching hers. Neither of them looked at the other, just staring straight ahead. She was just too stunned to speak.

Slowly, she swallowed and sighed, " *This is really over. Isn't it?* "

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him looking to her, remorse on his face. " *Did it ever really begin?* " he asked quietly, and she didn't want to admit he was right. All at once, she felt the ground disappearing beneath her. Where did her future lie now? Would Eywa even allow their mateship? Or even if She did, what would happen? Would they be sleeping with other people until they died, turning a blind eye to one another's extramarital activities? Would they produce children and not with one another and just give them the name of Tsan'ten? All the sordid scenarios played out in her head and it made her physically sick, but the one that really punched her in the gut: *I won't ever be tsahík.* She just knew it. Giving a sniff, she altered her position and rested her head on his shoulder, her arm wrapping in a strange hug around his arm. After a few moments, he edged closer and came to take her hand, rubbing his thumb over it in little circles for comfort. And they both just sat there, uncertain, sighing.

" *I knew you weren't happy* ," she murmured.

He looked down at her. " *I just felt so dreadful to say it.* "

She chewed on her lip, so hard she felt she could taste the blood on her lips. " *I love you,* " she murmured to him. And realising what a position she had just put him in: " *You don't have to say it back.* "

So he didn't.

• • •

" *All right, everyone come in!* " Grace called, sounding much more ecstatic than she had several hours before. She and the usual suspects had come outside to stand in front of Hometree, finding

Tsu'tei and Ja'kanhe walking towards them, the two of them looking rather desolate.

"Where were you two?" Neytiri asked them, eyeing Tsu'tei suspiciously, but Ja'kanhe simply said, "Needed air. What is this?" he added with a tilt of his head to Grace.

The scientist was wielding the camera again. N'deh knew her well and had a feeling she wanted to take more photos of the group. He had been right. "Grace is wanting a photo," Tzu'khan informed, pulling a face behind her and getting an elbow from his biological mother for it.

"Well why not? Come on, it'll be fun! I can compare it to the photo I took a few years ago." Eytukan took his mate's hand and then tugged both of his sons into it. Tsu'tei stepped in too, though she kept well away from Ja'kanhe. N'deh grabbed Grace whilst Neytiri took the camera, adjusting it.

"Neytiri must be in the photo, too!" Ja'kanhe exclaimed, sounding rather displeased she was prepping to take the photo.

"But who else could take it?" she asked him honestly, and before he could respond, Eytukan turned around and called to someone behind them. Zuleika stepped out of the shadows of Hometree, and came to stand beside Neytiri, who was adjusting it for a night shot. She took Zuleika's hand and placed it on the dial, showing her how to take the photo. Zuleika smiled and said 'Yes' in Na'vi to show she understood, so then Neytiri could come and stand beside Ja'kanhe. Grace glanced over at them, and smiled a little, before focusing back on the Ikran Clan leader. N'deh wrapped his arms around Grace's middle, just like in their wedding photo. Eytukan linked arms with Mo'at beside them. Tsu'tei stood, a bit alone, on Mo'at's left. Tzu'khan stood, a younger version of Eytukan, right beside him, his arm placed on Ja'kanhe's shoulders, which made Grace smile, and on the other end of the photo, curled under Ja'kanhe's other arm, stood beautiful Neytiri, her arm around him.

" *Everyone smile!* " Grace said, which she and her other Avatar counterpart did instinctively. Zuleika lifted the camera up and took the photo once everyone had.

It would be the last photo of them altogether.

• • •

Mo'at had a fitful sleep that night. Her constant tossing and turning woke Eytukan several times and she had a feeling he was on the verge of telling her to go and sleep in the council room instead. She couldn't help it. It was as if Eywa were trying to tell her, warn her, of something. She couldn't shake the sense of foreboding, and due to it, she surprised even her mate when she was found wide awake before even him.

" *You look like you haven't slept at all* ," he told her as he rose from their hammock, stifling a yawn on the back of his hand.

" *I haven't* ," she admitted, her voice scratchy. She was exhausted from the festival and she honestly felt like she would fall onto her face asleep, but sleep evaded her. Her tail hung slackly, either in sadness or complete torment she had no idea.

He came over to give her a good morning kiss. " *Come on, let's get some breakfast. Might make you feel better.* "

But coming down the steps made her feel even worse. As she stepped into the breakfast area, she saw Neytiri already awake, handing out the microphones. She watched as the young woman attached one to Ja'kanhe, and felt the dread just fester. " *I think I'm going to go pray* ," she murmured to her mate, squeezing his hand as he came over to the group.

Neytiri cast her eyes up and greeted the leader appropriately. " *Good morning,* " she said to him, giving him one of the microphones so she and he could communicate with the troop. Five of them this morning. Tzu'khan finished attaching one of the microphones to

another and came to stand beside her, blinking. " *Good luck.* " She was looking at Ja'kanhe especially when she said that. "I will be standing by. Talk to me any time."

"See you at dinner," he smiled at her, before giving a call from the back of his throat, and the five of them left the tree. Neytiri flicked her tail to the side, and Tzu'khan and Eytukan followed her, back up the stairs and into the council room, where they would be waiting. Giving instructions. Listening.

Grace came in a little while after the clan had begun breakfast, bringing three bowls of porridge for them. "You all need to eat," she said, passing it to them with a smile.

"Thank you, Mother," Tzu'khan said, which made Neytiri's ears shoot up. She looked between the two of them, utterly shocked as they were so good around each other now. *Well that saves a lot of drama,* she couldn't help but think.

"Hey," Grace murmured, and it took her a few moments to realise that she was the one being spoken to. Grace sat down beside her. "How are you holding up?"

Stressed out of my wits , was the response she wanted to give, but she just looked into her bowl and said meekly, "Fine, thank you. And you?"

"Good."

It was the most they had spoken to one another in a week. Neytiri opened her mouth to say something else but stopped when she heard a voice on the microphone say, " *Can you hear me?* " It was Ja'kanhe. She reached over to the microphone and pressed the button to respond, "Jake, it's me. How's it going?"

"Better, now that I hear you," he said, his voice sounding warm. She smiled at it.

"Where are you?"

"We have reached the fence."

"Good, focus along there," she instructed him.

"Is he near the airfield?" Grace asked, and Neytiri gave a nod.

Tzu'khan was glancing over the plans she had haphazardly made on the leaves over the past few days. "Neytiri?" he asked, and she glanced up. He held up one of the leaves. "This one could work."

She arched an eyebrow. "Seriously? I didn't think Na'vi healing stretched that far."

"Lemme see," Grace asked, stretching out a hand to take the leaf. She surveyed it before turning to Neytiri and saying, "Is this the plan you meant before?" When she nodded, "It could work. We'd just have to talk to Mo'at. I'm pretty sure that could work."

"Maybe," Tzu'khan said, scratching his nose thoughtfully. "I am not my mother. I might be wrong. Healing, me? Not good."

The women laughed softly at the joke, and he joined in. Some hope flared in her heart. She silently prayed that he was right about it. But then they heard a crackling on the microphone again, so she became distracted. "Jake? How's it going?" she asked.

"Good. But Neytiri, did you send us to wrong place?"

She frowned, and the others looked at her. "How do you mean?" she asked, trying to recalculate and wonder if she had told them something wrong.

"Well… no one here. No one."

"Tell me exactly what you see."

"I see a long house… Some wooden platforms."

"You're near the Avatar compound, Ja'kanhe, you wouldn't see many humans there," Grace said. "If any."

Neytiri frowned though. "It's like past ten in the morning, there should be some activity around." Into the microphone she asked, "Jake, do you see Avatars?"

"No, Neytiri, nothing – I cannot – " Suddenly his words were cut off. A loud screeching sound which made them all place their hands over their ears hit the air. If there had been windows around them the glass would have shattered, or perhaps their sensitive eardrums were going to. It was as if the microphone's audio limit had been reached, and that was exactly what was happening. Neytiri pounced on it, trying to turn it down, and when she did and got it to a manageable volume, she heard Jake yelling what sounded like " *Get back! Get back!* "

"Jake?!" Neytiri called into the piece.

"Neytiri…!" The audio was now filled with static and cut out often. But what terrified her was that now that she had turned down the audio, it picked up background noise, which sounded a lot like gunfire. The colour drained from her face. "Cannot… humans… guns… dead… they knew!"

"Jake? Jake! You're breaking up! Can you read me? Say something, anything!"

BOOM!

Silence.

The audio had cut out.

Desperately, Neytiri shook the device and said again, "Jake? Jake?! Come on, baby, talk to me! Jake! Ja'kanhe…!"

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Thirteen

Trudy crossed the night wet tarmac, taking the stairs two at a time to reach the top. She checked her watch: 4:00 am. *The things you get me to do for you, Nicole* , she could only think as she hurried inside. As she had flown hurriedly back to base she had noticed the strange colour of the sky that morning, which hung overhead like an army surplus blanket. She'd ask some wise guy about it later, but she'd never seen the Pandorian sky in such a sickly monotone.

Shrugging it off, she ducked inside, taking off her mask in the small space before going into the area, steadying her breathing. If anyone really caught her, she'd be up shit creek without a paddle, but she had tipped one of the guards stationed off – he would delete any footage of her comings and goings. A wiser woman would have sat her down and told her what a silly little bitch she was, hurrying to help the scientist and the marine and barely getting so much as a cup of coffee for her help, at the risk of being kicked off the planet. She couldn't explain it properly: she *wanted* to help them, but for what, and why, she didn't know.

Once she got in, she quickly dashed down the quiet halls to the science labs. The only sound accompanying her hurried footsteps were the melodic hum of some of the machines they left on overnight. She wiped the sheen of nervous sweat off of her forehead as she came to break yet another rule: she typed in the key code for the science dormitory – the men's dormitory – and let herself in. Quietly manoeuvring around the other sleeping scientists, she stripped off and climbed back under the covers of the furthest bed from the door. She glanced over to the one that had been untouched for a long time now, across from her; Grace hadn't even bothered to tidy her covers before getting the hell out of dodge, as she had put it.

Trudy breathed as she felt a hand move over her bare chest, and a drowsy murmuring of, "Mmm, where were you?"

She rolled over, looking at the half-asleep face of Norm. She leaned in to give him a kiss and whispered, "Needed water. Go back to sleep, it's far too early in the morning."

And sleep she did more than him. With her midnight escapades, she was far too exhausted to focus on anything, until she felt herself being roughly shaken awake. "I'm up, I'm up!" she exclaimed with a slight laugh, figuring Norm wanted her. But it wasn't he who was standing over her – rather, she was looking into the bright eyes of that journalist woman, Marcia De Los Santos. It took her a moment to realise who it was: without make-up, which she was so accustomed to seeing on her, Marcia looked like death warmed up, and she didn't expect the journalist to take kindly to what she said, so she kept that opinion to herself. Yet perhaps it was the fact that she wore such a terrified expression that really destroyed the beauty of her.

"Whassamatter?" Trudy asked groggily, being wary as she sat up, pulling the sheet to cover herself. And then she realised something very strange about the situation: "How'd'you get in here?"

"I'll explain later, just please get up, get dressed and come outside!" Marcia exclaimed, a pleading note in her voice. She actually looked like she was on the verge of tears. Thoroughly bewildered, and horribly curious, Trudy pulled her clothes roughly on, not bothering to realise that half of her t-shirt was tucked into her pants while the other wasn't, not to mention she was missing a sock.

A whole realm of possibilities was coming to her, and with each one, it felt like someone was slowly teasing the pin out of a hand grenade. Had someone reported her and Norm? Had the man she'd tipped off actually given her away? Oh shit, was it something to do with helping Grace and Nicole? Her heart was thumping so fast as she came to the lab that she felt like she could feel its beats in her bones. When she came out however, she didn't see Quaritch, or Selfridge, or any

of the usual suspects. In fact, she saw Marcia, Norm, and one of the scientists she had no opinion on (simply for the fact she didn't know him), Hegner, sitting at the desk. She only really knew him in her mind as Doctor Who Wears Long Sleeves Even In Forty Degree Celsius Weather, which he was wearing now.

"What's going on?" Trudy asked.

Marcia licked her dry lips, her teeth tugging at a piece of skin on them. "Can we trust you?"

She stiffened. "Depends what for," she replied simply.

"It's okay, you can trust her," Norm stepped in, sounding rather stern. "She has been helping Grace and Nicole over the past couple of weeks, running them around."

"That's what I thought. Sorry, Chacon, I just needed to ask."

Her confusion was not ebbing away with any moment of this conversation. Her eyebrows creased together. "Anyone want to tell me what the hell is goin' on?" she asked. "You sound like you're covering somethin' up and this already sounds really dodgy."

Marcia beckoned her over closer with a finger, and she came to stand with the group at the desk. One of the monitors was on, and it showed some of the security camera feeds. Trudy recognised them as around the Avatar compound, spying the longhouse, the larger-than-life exercise equipment. They were looking at it from a birds' eye view, as the camera was placed in the corner, hidden under one of the eaves of the roof. It was clear enough to realise something was happening down below; there was a whole lot of commotion in the middle of the field, quite a few of the troopers struggling to restrain something.

Or rather, someone.

Bucking wildly like a horse was a native of Pandora. Trudy gasped and looked at Norm, who looked more ashen than usual. Marcia touched the screen and the sound came on. They had to really pay attention, as the wind was howling outside and caused the voices to almost be carried away with the wind.

"… easy at it, boys, c'mon!" called one of the troopers. She felt her teeth clamp together. She didn't need him to turn around to face the camera to know who it was. *Wainfleet.* She hadn't seen him in weeks due to scheduling conflicts, but she saw his arm was out of its sling. Nicole ought to have thrown him harder. He was trying to ease the Na'vi down with thick ropes, tied like lassos, but the native put up a good fight: she could hear his primeval roar, and watched as his hands and legs struck out at the smaller humans. She was amazed they hadn't shot him in the head yet. But there was a wrong move from the Na'vi, who struck his leg out like a donkey kick at the face of one of the men, and a rope strung around it. Preoccupied as he tried to free his limb, another man laughed and threw another rope around his body, tugging on it to tighten. The nine foot giant fell to the dusty ground, causing more laughter from the men. And to add insult to injury, now that he was bound, another trooper flew out another rope that dug into the native's mouth; he bit at it, like a horse champing at the bit as his head was pulled roughly up, the rope digging into the corners of his mouth. And they all piled on with the cowboy talk.

"He ought to go in the rodeo for how much he's fightin'!" they guffawed.

"We got a wild bronco here, boys!"

"How much do you think I'd get for a Na'vi tail, if we flew it back to Earth? Someone could use it as a fly swatter."

"No!" Wainfleet's voice, strong and powerful, silenced the troopers. He walked up close to the bound Na'vi, and even from the angle of the camera that had them looking down on the scene, she could see the look of defiance in the alien's eyes. The barrel of his gun ran

tenderly across the Na'vi's face, and he seemed very panicked at it. "Quaritch wants him alive. He's a good bait for us."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"This little guy here says he is the son of the clan Patriarch, so that gives us a pretty good chip." Wainfleet crouched down, and even from the back of his head, Trudy could imagine the smirk on his face. "Isn't that right, little warrior? Such a noble warrior, aren't you?" he mocked in a sing-song voice. "Where's the rest of your troop, huh? Where are they? Where are your little playmates?"

The Na'vi didn't say anything, but she saw his ears go back.

"They ain't comin', are they? My men took some good care of them. And it's fortunate you are who you are, or you would have met the same fate."

Trudy felt her heart clench. She breathed out and looked over at Norm, who looked livid. She felt him shaking as she reached to take his hand, trying to soothe him. She heard a sob. She glanced over, and felt her heart tear when she saw Hegner crying.

"Fucking daisy cutters," she snarled under her breath, but Marcia hushed her as Wainfleet was still talking.

"Now listen to me very carefully, little prince," Wainfleet crooned. "Are Grace and Nicole behind this?" The Na'vi obviously stiffened. "Yes… yes you cannot lie, can you? You dunno how. So I'll ask you again: Are the Avatars behind this?"

Norm sucked in breath. "Fuck… Oh fuck, Ja'kanhe, stay quiet," he begged even though there was no chance of him hearing.

The now named Na'vi – Ja'kanhe – didn't say a word.

Wainfleet seemed to grow impatient, and he struck out with the edge of his gun again, but this time hit him across his cheekbone. Almost

instantly a purplish bruise began to blossom. "Are they behind it?" he asked, all traces of sweetly speech gone. "Answer me! I know you can speak English!"

There came no answer, but then Norm let out a yell at the same time Ja'kanhe did: Wainfleet had reached behind and grabbed at the base of his queue and yanked his head up. The Na'vi gave a bloodcurdling scream of agony and cried out, "She dead! Nicole… dead. She died."

Trudy felt her knees actually buckling, and she pulled out a chair to ease herself into it.

"When?" Wainfleet questioned dangerously, but he didn't get an answer. The Na'vi had no concept of human time. He said nothing for a moment, but then tugged again just for the torture of it, and let him go, letting him sprawl back into the dust. "Her human part ain't dead," he said airily, flicking his fingers and getting some of the troopers to move out. "Find her. I'm sure our boss would like a few words with her. And Grace."

"What do we do with him, boss?" one of the men asked, looking to Ja'kanhe who was coughing and spluttering, shaking with the lingering pain.

"Lock him up somehow. Just get him out of my sight – "

The audio cut off. Hegner had reached over to the screen to turn off the monitor. Tears were streaming down his gaunt face. Marcia reached over to put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It's 2152 all over again," he spluttered, taking deep breaths. Norm and Trudy exchanged puzzled looks, but the journalist appeared to know what he was speaking of: she had been here longer than they had.

"It's all right, Hege," she soothed softly. "Ja'kanhe's alive, and that's the main thing."

"The others… Do you think they really…?" Norm trailed off, not wanting to finish the sentence. Silence hung over them. They knew the answer but none of them wanted to give it.

Trudy looked over to Marcia. "How did you get access to this?"

"I hacked into the computer," Hegner said, sniffling as he did his best to pull himself together. "But Marcia has known for a few days…"

"No, I suspected," she corrected. She looked at Norm and Trudy to explain. "Wainfleet's right: unless Nicole died in the past three days, I saw her and Grace, right as rain, here at 12:30 am. Quaritch called them over. It seems he wasn't getting any information out of her and he was getting angry."

"I need more context here," Norm said, his brow furrowed.

Marcia and Hegner looked at each other. "Quaritch called Selfridge, Hegner, Nicole and myself into an office about a month and a half ago. He got her to sign a deal effectively stating that she would give him intel about the Omaticaya clan. Basically he wanted her to get them out. I don't know what she was getting in exchange but whatever it was she agreed readily. At the time.

"But then that day they came in… I've never seen Doctor Augustine so angry. And they were fighting about how Quaritch and Selfridge were using Nicole. More it was just gender-based insults but in between them – "

"You got the impression Nicole has changed her mind," Norm finished.

Marcia nodded. "Yep. She's trying to undo this."

Hegner seemed to steel himself, straightening up and clearing his throat. "She's known of their plan for a while. The RDA administration plans to blow up Hometree."

"Bullshit!" Norm exclaimed.

Marcia shook her head. "I wish I could deny it, but that was the reason they needed Nicole's help."

"And she knows it, because she… she overheard them talking to me," he murmured.

"They can't do that! There are lives in there! Children!"

"You honestly think that matters to them? All Parker wants is to keep the shareholders happy, and he'd do anything to keep it that way."

Norm looked like he was ready to scream or hit something. Trudy could almost see the veins bursting to the surface of his skin. She placed a comforting hand on Norm's as she said, "She obviously told Grace else Grace would have thrown her off the mountain by now. And based on what you said, Marcia, they seem like a picture of unity."

"Obviously she's changed her mind, as we said before. They caught Ja'kanhe and his troop spying around the compound," Marcia replied.

"How did they even realise? I mean, the Na'vi can really hide themselves…" Norm tried, his voice unsteady.

"Something tells me they knew. They were waiting for it. I think Doctor Augustine let on too much, or maybe she didn't have to say anything and Quaritch was already figuring it out."

Hegner cleared his throat. "Trust me, I've known him longer than anyone," he murmured. He gave a shudder that racked his whole slim body. "Give him one clue, you'd be amazed how much he can figure things out on his own."

"But the real giveaway only I heard," Marcia murmured, dropping her voice even though no one was around. "They're definitely keeping

something hidden because I heard them saying, 'They won't catch on'. And Nicole saying 'blue murder' really doesn't leave much to the imagination."

Trudy shook her head. "So they're wanting to go up against gunships with bows and arrows."

Hegner nodded. "Yeah… they're screwed."

Norm slowly pulled himself up, his expression turning into stone. "No," he said steadily. "No they're not." He looked at Trudy. "Babe, start your helicopter up."

• • •

Her heart was beating as fast as the dance drums. Neytiri let the device drop from her hands to the floor, trying to get her mind to focus. *Jake, no…* He couldn't have been attacked. How did this all fall apart? Had someone tipped RDA off? How would they? Only Grace and her knew of the plan…

Tzu'khan leapt up so fluidly she missed the movement. "Well?" he said. "We must go get them."

"I don't have a visual feed of what's going on there," Neytiri told him. "I can't estimate who has him, or how many there are, or where he could be. And it's not like we can go and spy on them again, they'll just catch us again!"

"You want to leave them there?"

"No – no!" she assured Tzu'khan as his nostrils flared in anger at the thought of abandonment of their people. "I just don't think it's a case of us rushing in." How she wanted to rush in. How she wanted to be sure Jake was safe, but it was just too big a risk in the grand scheme of things.

Grace massaged her temples. How had this turned on its head so fast? She looked over to her brother-in-law, who looked absolutely torn, not at all as brave as he had just a little while previously. " *Brother,* " she said, making Eytukan lift his head. " *Neytiri and I might have to… go and speak to the humans. Maybe we can make them see reason –* "

"I think it is past time for speak, Mother," Tzu'khan said warily, in a voice that made her worry he was going to get angry again. "They make that clear. They have taken our brothers and sisters."

Grace's ears went back, and she looked to Neytiri, praying she had some back up plan. The young Avatar gnawed on her lip so hard she drew blood, glancing around the room as if trying to find the answer etched into the wood walls. It wasn't the answer she had been hoping for. "Maybe Tzu'khan's right," Neytiri finally said. "If they've taken them, that's a sign of absolute war."

"Ever thought it's a trap?"

"If it is…" Neytiri trailed off, unsure where she had been going with that statement. She looked to Tzu'khan. " *Brother, what do you think?* "

He eyed her for a long moment, and by the way his ears flickered at the use of the moniker, she wondered if he didn't want her to call him that. But instead, in English for her, he said, "I think we must go. Before more bad happen. I just… I feel. Inside." He gestured to where his heart was placed, on the left side of his chest. *What a shame,* Neytiri could only think. *You RDA people have no idea how similar the humans and Na'vi really are. An incredible act of evolution, really. How many lifeforms are this similar to humans?*

"Speak to your mother," Neytiri instructed. "She might know something." He bowed his head to her and dashed out of the room, leaving her to her increasingly apprehensive thoughts. Could they kill him? The scary part was the possibility was there. He might be dead even now, and she would have no idea. Why would they keep him

and the others alive? They had no use for Na'vi. But what really terrified her was where had they gone wrong?

In a few moments, Tzu'khan came back with N'deh, Mo'at and Tsu'tei, the latter of whom looked very distressed. N'deh rushed over to embrace Grace and soothe her. The *tsahík* looked stressed, but she was very businesslike as she said, "I agree with my son – we must go and rescue them."

Neytiri glanced at the leader, and nodded her assent. "My *tsahík* , has Eywa said anything…?" she asked, wondering if she was actually privy to that conversation.

Mo'at hesitated, and then murmured, "Not directly. But she did warn of trouble. I felt this morning." When she glanced at her mate, she saw his ears prick forward. Now he realised why she had had such a fitful night, and the blood drained out of his face. She focused back to the youngest Avatar. "We must rescue. Take whatever you need, whoever you need. And any help we can give…" She trailed off, her eyes looking to the floor. She swallowed her nervousness and said, "I want you to know, Neytiri, that I would never put my clan in danger, as a leader. But as a mother… I would do anything to protect my sons."

Tsu'tei gave a choking sob, and Neytiri felt her heart break for her. It was strange, feeling that towards the woman who had made her life such hell, but all of a sudden, it was as if she wasn't in her own body: she was in hers. How would she honestly feel, having a fiancé who didn't love her, who cheated on her, who didn't want anything to do with her? How would she feel having been built up her entire life for one purpose, only to have it taken away just days before it happened? She had never been one for big plans and aspirations, but even Neytiri had to admit she felt sick at the thought. *You're a lot stronger than I give you credit for,* she suddenly thought, feeling a strange sensation of respect towards the young Na'vi woman. It was a feeling that rocked her to her very core. Tsu'tei obviously felt eyes on her, and she looked up. For a moment, the two women locked gazes, and it wasn't a case of one holding hatred, or both. Neither of

them did. She wasn't sure what she saw in those eyes, and Tsu'tei herself wasn't sure what she was seeing in the Avatar's. But hatred was gone. Both of them were spent. There were more important things to worry about.

Grace removed herself from N'deh's embrace and slowly stepped over to her sister, coming to squeeze her arm. Mo'at looked at her, putting her four-fingered hand on top of hers. " *It will be all right,* " she told her. " *Neytiri and Tzu'khan and I will bring them back.* "

Neytiri's head snapped up. She had actually understood that. " 'You'?" she asked Grace, not even trying to hide the shock in her voice. She gave a laugh that held no humour. "Grace, I'm sorry, I'm not letting you anywhere near that – "

"They have Ja'kanhe!" Grace exclaimed, her tail rigid.

"Yeah, I know! We all heard it! Doesn't mean I'm letting every Tom, Dick and Harry onto the team," Neytiri ordered. "You don't even know how to defend yourself."

"I have to be there. I'm not letting those assholes get away with this."

"Look, I get your motives are personal but – "

"Oh and yours aren't?" Grace challenged, anger dripping off her voice. The room went silent as the two Avatars ensued in a battle of wills. Tsu'tei kept her eyes away, feeling her heart tear just a bit more at that. *So everyone knows* , she thought, her ears going down and more tears flooding from her eyes. *Everyone except me knew about them.*

Neytiri's mouth dropped open in shock, and she quickly clamped it shut. "Fine!" she finally said, knowing she wasn't going to get anywhere. She shouldered the quiver of arrows she kept around her, and pointed her finger directly at Grace. "Let me be clear: it'll be your funeral."

Grace swallowed, and gave a curt nod. N'deh looked scandalised at the thought of his wife dying, and he said, "I am coming too!"

"Me!" Eytukan said sternly, copying the movement of his sister-in-law's nod.

Neytiri put her palm to her forehead. *Jesus Christ, what is this? A Tsan'ten family take-no-prisoners?* By the determined looks of those around her, she knew she wasn't going to get anywhere. She sighed and stalked out of the room. "If you're coming, come on! And we better get more efficient help because Eywa knows we need…!"

She began to trail off as she kept moving but they stayed in the room. Mo'at looked at her mate and son. She just couldn't shake the feeling that something was dreadfully wrong. It stayed within her like a stone in her stomach. " *Be careful* ," she told them. Pleaded them. There were tears in her eyes as she touched both their foreheads with her hand in a prayer. After murmuring a few words, she kissed Eytukan and hugged Tzu'khan. " *Bring him home* ," she whispered to him.

Tzu'khan blinked. " *I will, I promise mama.* "Grace and N'deh marched on ahead, and Eytukan smiled at her before following them.

Tsu'tei waited for Mo'at to leave, and was about to follow her out, when she felt a strong hand clasp around her wrist. She turned back around to face Tzu'khan, who said, " *Don't worry, Tsu'tei. I promise you, I will bring him home. You needn't cry.* "

Well if not making her cry was his intention, he didn't do a good job of it; hearing those words just brought on a whole new spill of tears. " *You promise?* " she sniffed. Her ears went back, and she took steadying breaths. " *I'm… I'm sorry, I haven't really had time to… process this.* "

He sighed softly. " *I know* ," he whispered. " *None of us expected the day to end like this.* "

She brought her head up to look at him, using her free hand to wipe away some of the tears. " *How do you do it?* " she asked him. When he looked confused by the question, " *How do you let go of all the anger and…* "

A soft smile played on the edge of his lips. " *Something tells me, you have already started.* " He looked back behind him to see where everyone was, and let go of her hand, letting his hands take her by the shoulders. He looked at her intensely, as if he needed her to understand something. " *I know about rage. I know how it eats you up. And in the end, you're just left with the big mess you've made. Now I can see in you that you have already realised this. You're just trying to let it slowly fade away.* "

She swallowed. She bit her lip. " *He told me he didn't love me,* " she whispered. " *Or rather… I said it to him and he didn't say it back. I should be so angry, I should really hate him but I just… I c-can't. It's as if I knew all along. And honestly, just hearing it is like a breath of fresh air. But I just wish I knew what I did wrong.* "

His topaz eyes seemed to pierce into her own. " *You know* ," he said. " *I still vividly remember the day a little girl, stumbling through the forest, came to the Omaticaya clan. And she was taken in by the leaders, and given a home and an education, and has turned out to be one of the most integral parts of the clan.* " He squeezed her shoulders a little more. " *Ja'kanhe has nothing to do with it. You are your own person. You are respected for your own person, and not some title you'd marry into. Do not ever forget that, Tsu'tei. You are one of the strongest women I know and you always will be. Who you're with is irrelevant to the person you are. You, by yourself, matter. You hear me?* "

After several moments, she blinked. She then paused, before tilting up her chin and saying, " *You aren't an asshole, Tzu'khan. You just are really good at acting the part.* "

He gave a laugh. " *And you're not defined by him* ."

She breathed out, steadying herself. She felt a lot calmer and more secure than she had before. She smiled and shrugged off his strong grip, before coming to give him a big hug. " *Bring them home safe* ."

" *We have myself, Neytiri, N'deh, my father, several other warriors and one very angry and pissed off Grace.* " It was now her turn to laugh. " *We will. I promise.* " They looked at one another. Nothing was heard except the howling of the wind outside. *I'm glad you're back to yourself,* she thought. As if to prove that he was, as she was about to tell him as such, he ruined the moment by reaching down and ruffling her hair. She didn't even snap at him for ruining her braids – she just laughed. He opened his mouth to say something, until the sound of someone calling his name hit their ears. " *I best go. I'll talk to you later.* "

" *Good luck!* " Tsu'tei called after him as he raced down to join the group.

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N'deh and Eytukan had worked together to rustle up more of the members, including some of Zuleika and Tihawnu's clan. The two leaders wanted to come along, but Neytiri was firm in saying no; they needed more monarchy around, for safety and logistical reasons. She didn't say it openly, but she knew this was a deadly mission. No one else seemed to realise it more than her, and she was sure she offended him when she turned around, just a few moments before they were to head into the forest, and told Eytukan to stay behind.

"Don't take it personally," she told him with N'deh translating beside her. "But the Omaticaya needs their leaders. Both of them."

His eyes flashed in a fury, and even Mo'at, who had been standing by the entrance to see them off, looked like she had been slapped in the face by the statement. Neytiri felt dreadful as she said strictly before he could retort, "That is an order, Eytukan." He looked distinctly ruffled, but he obviously saw the wisdom in her request, and stepped back. And yes, perhaps it was to keep him safe – the

Omaticaya needed their leaders. But admittedly she did it for another reason as well – once the other members of the various clans saw the most revered man in the land listen to the woman Avatar, they quickly followed suit. Due to it, she was the one who lead the charge as they slipped soundlessly into woodland soon after.

There were twenty of them in all. She had sent five out the last time and come back with zero. She wasn't taking chances, yet at the same time, she wasn't sending out too many – she didn't want to draw too much attention to themselves at first. Though as they walked, her stomach began to knot in dread; the scouts had been discovered with only five. Only five. How had RDA done it? *Someone must have tipped them off* , she thought. *Grace.* But she hit that thought out of her mind so fast, and her face burned at even the idea of it. Grace would rather run a knife across her own throat than do anything against her people, and Neytiri knew it.

The little army set out, carrying various weapons. N'deh had given Neytiri one of the machetes as she had had on her first day. They moved at a hurried yet hushed pace to cover the distance. Their feet squelched in the mud, still wet from the night. She found the forest uneasily quiet; she could barely hear the call of a *syaksyuk,* or the rumble of a passing *'angtsìk* .She had instantly begun to look around for the tree to get the sap for insect repellent, but discovered there was no need; no creature buzzed around them. Discomfort settled into her, but she didn't have the chance to really focus on what was missing. She had to get her head straight. She estimated it would take a little over an hour. It was what she hoped; the faster in and out, the better and safer. She had kept her microphone with her, and ordered the hierarchy to keep theirs around. She wondered if it was a good idea to leave that with just them, without an Avatar's guide, but Eytukan had obviously wanted to prove himself quite capable and seemed to manage it well.

There was little conversation as they approached. No one felt like chatting, and most talk was of a logistical nature. It was the only sound in the deadened forest, and even that didn't do much to bring

up the volume; the Na'vi were very quiet. Neytiri often checked behind her to see how the group was doing. Grace kept her head down most of the time, talking to N'deh, but every now and again her eyes did flick up and meet her own. Her face was battle-serious, but Neytiri felt she could see in Grace's eyes a look of gratitude. *Don't thank me yet* , she could only think, and prayed to Eywa she could keep Grace safe. She still didn't know how to handle a gun. They didn't have any, but on the off-chance they got a hold of one… No, she was getting ahead of herself.

She did a rapid headcount, and was shocked to discover one of their number missing, until Tzu'khan's voice was beside her: "You know how to get in?"

She didn't look at him as they continued to walk. "I got a couple of ideas."

"Really? Care to tell?"

She kept silent, and pretended to be very interested in the colour of the sky; it was a good ploy, as she had never seen the sky in such a dull, disgusting tint.

"I think you do not like me."

"Oh? Picked up on that, have you?" she asked, sounding more snappish than she intended. The eldest Tsan'ten didn't say anything.

They continued to walk in silence, but he kept up the pace with her. Finally he said, "I am sorry, Neytiri." From the genuine apologetic tone, she had no choice but to look at him. "I have not treated you with respect and – "

"It's not me you should be apologising to – "

"I said sorry to Grace." From the corner of her eye, she noticed he was looking squarely at her. "Now I say sorry to you."

She almost stopped walking, but thought better of it. They all had to keep moving. "That is good of you," she replied, blinking her assent but still keeping her eyes forward. "But you will have to be the one to forgive me for not forgiving you so readily." The sickening *slap!* of Grace falling onto the mud, the worry that had pierced her heart, the way Jake had been on edge for ages after Tzu'khan's arrival were all events she was not going to forget easily.

To her astonishment, he smiled. His tail flicked excitedly, which made her anger ebb just a bit more; he looked as happy as a puppy who was being given a bone. "I will take that as a start."

And just as she had on the first day she laid eyes on him, she saw the family resemblance. It wasn't there on him when he wasn't smiling, for Jake smiled so much; but now that the beam lighted up his whole face, she felt her heart pang. *You look just like him* , she thought, and immediately after, *Please Jake, please, please be okay…*

He might have sensed the path her thoughts were taking, for he said, "My brother. He very fond of you."

She hadn't realised she had been looking at the forest floor until he said that. "Huh?" she asked, her ears pricking. "What do you mean?"

"Ja'kanhe. He like you. Very much."

She was practically certain she was blushing, and she looked ahead. But curiosity caused her to ask, "How do you know?"

"He never ever stop talking about you!" he said, in almost an exasperated groan. When she looked over, she noticed how expressive Tzu'khan really was. He wasn't always stone faced – right now, his face was contorted in almost disgust, and he looked so comical she nearly laughed. "We all wanted him to speak of something else. But he never did. Always saying how wonderful you are."

Despite herself, she could feel the smile coming across her features. "Well, I never knew that."

"Now you do." They exchanged another smile between them, before they quietened. His smile slowly faded, as did hers. *What will happen if he's…?* But she couldn't think of that. She could only pray. And pray hard she did. She had never been the praying sort, but she really had to now. "You must have," Tzu'khan began, almost sounding nervous, "become very close with him. Over recent time."

She slowly nodded. "As a student. Yes." He watched her for a long time, and there was something in his gaze that told her he knew she was lying. But he didn't question it. As it was, they were getting closer, and Neytiri needed to concentrate.

Following the twisting path of the undergrowth, she kept her eyes peeled and her mind open. She could tell they were getting closer, for she heard the *beep! beep!* of a reversing truck. Some of the tractors rumbling into the base from the construction site. Her eyes counted over thirty of them coming through. Each of them were giant sized, and with such a size she could estimate three Na'vi could sit within them quite comfortably.

An idea slammed into her at the perfect time. Excitement coursed through her veins as she turned around to the group. " *Follow,* " she instructed, darting towards where the foliage began to thin. To the left side of her, she could see the metal chain link fence. Through that, her heart flared as she saw blue figures, but then sank as she realised they were the Avatars. A sudden horror pierced her. She was just assuming Jake and the others were here. She never sent another scout ahead to double check. *You fucking idiot,* she thought. *They could have taken them anywhere. There's no guarantee they are here.* Now she had yet another thing to pray for.

She could spy ahead of her the human-made road, and up ahead, the large tractors coming in. "Tzu'khan can you translate?" she asked, and he blinked. So she turned around to the rest of the group, speaking as he made her words understandable: "The human

machines," she began, assuming they didn't have a word for 'tractor'; Grace nodded at her, and she knew she had thought right. "If we can get under them, and grab onto the undercarriages, we can get through without being seen. I want half of us to go in, half to stay out, ready to run and defend. Once we are inside, we sprint for cover amongst those storage containers." She gestured to them, and she could tell N'deh recognised them; they were the same ones that he had been standing on the night they met. "Ready? Let's go!"

Before they went out, she gently made them wrap their queues around their necks like a scarf, to keep them out of the way; they would be hanging on and she didn't want their hair to get in the way. She knew how sensitive the queue was, and she shuddered to think of it being pulled by the tractor's wheels or getting caught on something before. After it, ten hunters and Grace, led by Neytiri, ran out of the trees and through the dust clouds. She quickly directed them, in groups of three, to duck under the trundling machines and hold on for dear life. The escort troopers in their powersuits missed them, and she said a silent prayer of thanks. She found herself wedged under a tractor with Grace and N'deh, which she was grateful for, as she told him to dash out first to lead the first group to the storage containers. She had been hoping Grace wouldn't fall off, and she didn't; obviously her Avatar was much stronger than Neytiri gave her credit for.

They rode in through the double gates of the compound, and she gave a flick of her tail; N'deh jumped off first and led the first five over to the storage containers. Thunder cracked overhead, and she found herself grateful as she heard the heavens open and begin to douse the ground with rain. She heard the troopers grow distracted, some of them muttering obscenities over 'tropical storms', and it was a good thing too, for with nature's diversion, she was easily able to get the rest over to the storage containers.

Grace was breathless as they got to the containers. *This was such a bad idea* , she thought to herself of coming, but it was too late to back down now. And she refused to show how exhausted she was,

trying to steady her breathing and being thankful for the rain to cool her down. But then one of the hunters steeled her resolve when she said, " *I saw them! They are being held in a cage.* "

" *Where?* " she asked.

The woman pointed towards the south side of the compound. She hesitated then. " *I did not see Ja'kanhe.* "

She knew she didn't have to translate for Neytiri; the look on her face told her she understood. "All right," Neytiri said, giving a curt nod. "I have a plan. Uh – Peyral?" she asked the girl, who gave a blink. Grace quickly stepped in to fully translate. "Right. Humans don't see rain as a good thing if money is on the line. So because of the rain I can practically guarantee that they will head inside soon, especially with it this heavy." It was as if she had been heard; the rain, which had been just a nuisance before, now came down pelting with full force, so much so she nearly had to shout to make herself heard: "So Peyal! I want you to tell N'deh and Grace exactly where you saw it. Grace will know where it is, and I want you all to go and get them out. Stay near the fence line and out of sight."

"And you?" Tzu'khan called.

"I need to get into the longhouse. I can get a disguise and they will just look me over as another Avatar, plain and simple."

"You are not going alone!"

"I've done worse things alone before, believe me." When he looked disbelieving, "I got pulled by a *fpxafaw* down to the forest floor and then chased by a pack of *nantang* just moments before meeting your brother. I'll be fine."

He settled, but N'deh said, "Neytiri, it might be best you have someone else with you. Just in case."

"I'll go," Grace offered, coming to stand beside her.

Neytiri stiffened, and hoped it wasn't too obvious. "Fine. Grace and Tzu'khan, stay with me." *I need one competent person* . "You can manage, N'deh?"

"Yes. See you soon."

The group broke apart. Neytiri led the way towards the compound, and told Grace and Tzu'khan to stay hidden amongst the storage containers. She dashed quickly over, and pushed apart the double gates, getting inside. She shook herself off like a wet dog, and walked through the wooden house. She hadn't been in here in ages. She barely spent any time in the compound – just one night, really – but she found herself feeling strangely nostalgic as she walked along the polished wood, through the large single beds they had been in, and smelling the alien scents of varnish and steel. Giving a shudder, she went to the back of the longhouse, finding the trunk Grace had opened that first day she was there. More nostalgia, which she quickly squashed. Opening it up, she grabbed a grey top for herself, black pants and sneakers, before thinking for a moment, and grabbing some new clothes for Grace, too. She sighed as she looked at them, running her fingers over the rough fabric. How had she found these comfortable before? She looked over herself, at her simple loin cloth, her yellow halter top and then the green necklace Jake had given her. She swallowed, and took it off her neck, looking at it in her palm. She brought it up to her lips and kissed the cold emerald stone. " *I'll find you* ," she murmured, turning the stone this way and that. But with almost no sunlight due to the storm, there was no sparkle within it.

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Ja'kanhe had never truly been hit in his life. One couldn't count training exercises; no one truly ever hit the prince and he knew it. Tzu'khan had hit him, yes, but that had been child's play compared to what the human had inflicted. He found himself rather amazed at the strength, but it was most likely due to the weight of the weapon. He had a feeling his cheekbone had been smashed.

After the bald, white skinned creature decided that he needed to 'get out of his sight', the troopers had roughly reined him up and half-walked, half-dragged him to a wooden post on the outskirts of the compound. They had obviously cut down a tree and shaved it, and it infuriated him as they bound him roughly to it. What really surprised him was they seemed to know of how his people communicated across distances, for the pole was on a concrete slab, with no way of him reaching soil. And, almost like an afterthought, they had tied black material around his eyes to obscure the world from him.

But they hadn't exactly succeeded, as his other senses were highly alert.

He could smell a strange roasted and bitter kind of smell, something akin to burnt *ikran* skin, and he wondered if that was the liquid Grace often remarked upon when she had been teaching them. " *You don't have '* coffee *' and I can't function this early in the morning!* " she'd jokingly tell the class, and for the younger ones she'd sometimes add a dramatic fainting act to get them to laugh. If that was the drink she meant, he honestly couldn't understand the pleasantness of it. And then he could also smell something that seemed like overcooked, unseasoned *talioang.* Through his blindness, he was offered some, but he kept his lips tightly sealed. He would never risk that; what if they had poisoned it? He would rather starve than suffer death from some Earth horror. He was suspicious and rightly so; he was trusting nothing. He could hear about eight males talking around him, but slowly the voices dwindled down to perhaps one or two, and then it became hard to hear them as rain began to pelt down.

"Awww, sheeee-it!" he heard one of the humans say. "Rain! Fuck me, let's get outta here."

"Would ya rather face a chance of a cold, or Quaritch being pissed?" asked the second. There came no answer. "Yeah, 'swot I thought!"

You speak so strangely, he thought, and remembered suddenly how hard it had been for him to understand Neytiri when she first came to the clan – she had sounded a lot like them, not finishing off her

words properly. But when he thought of her, his heart hurt. He had failed her. He had failed his clan. What if he never saw them again? He'd never see the ones who had ran with him again… *You're dead. You're dead and it's all my fault.*

"Fine, let's get outta here."

"What 'bout him?"

"Oh, fuck. Right." All of a sudden, Ja'kanhe felt fingers across his unbruised cheek, and he gave a growl of warning. "Hey, hey, hey! Calm down, buddy boy, it's all a-okay," the male said, sounding nicer than the other one's he had dealt with. He couldn't help but notice a condescension in the voice however. Still, he obeyed and quietened down as the binding was taken off his eyes. He blinked a few times to adjust to the light, and his eyes began to focus on the brown skinned creature. He looked rough with curly dark hair and a thick set jaw. "There!" the male smiled; Ja'kanhe didn't smile back. "Rude bugger, ain't he? Smile for me! Oi, actually, I got a great idea – Jake!" At first his ears pricked up, thinking he was being called (and then remembering sadly that only Neytiri called him that), but it turned out that the other soldier was called Jake. He looked over at the creature, and was pleased to see they absolutely looked nothing alike. *At least I know Neytiri didn't name me after him!* he thought, arching an eyebrow at the burly, rather tall human with dark skin.

The 'Jake' male came forward and the other male said, "Gimme your camera! Let's take a snapshot!"

"What? Are ya nuts?"

"Dude, c'mon, how often do you get a photo with a real life Na'vi? Send somethin' home for that wife o' yours."

"All right! You go first, he looks like he's the biting kind."

Do I? That's good to know, Ja'kanhe thought, gritting his teeth as the 'Jake' – *You imposter,* he thought savagely – whipped out a slim

device and tossed it to the male. He came towards Ja'kanhe, who rumbled in his throat warningly. "Now, now! For a photo, ya must smile!" the male grinned, coming over towards him. He smelt awful, and the prince's nostrils flared. He sighed, wondering when this torment would be over. He'd rather die than spend another day like this.

But then his eye caught something. His mouth spread in a grin, and his tail flicked.

"Yeah, yeah buddy!" the male exclaimed, looking as ecstatic as if he had gotten a *palulukan* to bow to him. "That's it! Now stay still..."

"Oh, I not smiling for camera," Ja'kanhe said, still wearing the smile.

The male stopped in his tracks, looking questioningly at him.

"I smile because Neytiri Tsan'ten is behind you."

The male barely got to turn around before –

THWACK!

Neytiri's blade ripped through the human. Blood splattered across the grounds and partly on Ja'kanhe, who grimaced. She had chopped right through the male's face, between the clamp of his jaws.

There was a scream. "RED ALERT! RED ALERT! THE AVATARS ARE MUTINYIN – " *THWACK!* The head of the human Jake rolled across the floor, halfway through his call for help. Neytiri breathed hard, her eyes murderous, though she looked half shocked at what she'd done. By the startled expression on the felled head, that made two of them. The blood fell on the concrete and jumped as it mixed with droplets of water. She eyed it for a few moments, but then it was as if she snapped out of the trance she was in. She breathed, and looked at him, her eyes back to their usual state. "Oh, my Jake, thank Eywa!" she exclaimed, coming towards him. She quickly

touched something on her chest, and he realised it was the microphone as she said, "Eytukan, Mo'at! He's fine, he's alive!" He breathed in relief as he heard his parents' excited exclamations of their own relief, and smiled as Neytiri came towards him. "Now, hold still – " Effortlessly, she came close to him, leaning behind to saw off the ropes. He groaned and flexed his arms, and with her spare hand she helped him to his feet. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you? Because if so, I swear I will cause more – "

But he didn't find out what the rest of that sentence was: he just grabbed her and pulled her in, kissing her fiercely. She melted into the kiss, her tail seeking his own as they kissed in the pouring rain.

"Wow. Everyone who saw that one coming, say 'Aye'."

The one who spoke was met with a chorus of 'Aye'. His eyes flashed open and he let Neytiri go, looking past her. Through the fog of the rain, he saw three other Na'vi standing there. He instantly blushed as he spied his older brother, his uncle N'deh and Grace, the latter of whom had spoken. But she didn't say it condemningly; in fact she was smiling. "Congratulations, you two!"

"You little liar!" Tzu'khan exclaimed, looking at Neytiri, but he was laughing as he said it.

He felt hugely embarrassed, and worried, but the Tsan'ten's were only smiling at them, happy in their happiness. But then he looked past them and saw a whole group of Na'vi of the clan and the *Pa'li* and *Ikran* clans there, and amongst them –

" *Ubeika! Yarsa! Neyten, Ani'sha, you're alive!* " he gasped, looking at the group who he had come with first. The ones who had been taken with him. " *They told me…* " He couldn't finish, feeling his words catch in his throat.

"First rule of humans," Grace explained, "They are full of shit talkers and you should never believe them. Especially Wainfleet."

The ones who understood English laughed, and he felt Neytiri squeeze his hand as N'deh, Grace and Tzu'khan came over to embrace him. "You scared me," Tzu'khan whispered, coming in for a second tight hug.

"I am fine," he replied, before speaking to everyone, "Thank you. All of you! You saved us all."

"I think, you will find, Neytiri did it." Tzu'khan glanced over at the young Avatar woman, and smiled. "Welcome to the family, Neytiri."

Her ears pricked up at that. "Hey, that reminds me!" She looked over at Ja'kanhe, her eyes soft and warm, but she arched an eyebrow and asked, " 'Neytiri Tsan'ten'?"

He let his arms slowly wrap around her. "If I remember," he murmured to her, "the right answer is, how do I say – 'A name I plucked out of thin air'?"

A smile spread across her face. She slowly nodded, before looking to the group, becoming serious once more. "Let's get out of here," she instructed, and he knew she was right – the humans would come to find them again. They were wasting time.

"Do not take one step, Moakley and Augustine."

He felt like ice water had been poured down his spine. Thunder cracked overhead, and through the heavy rain, he saw something that chilled him to his very core. He felt Neytiri stiffen beside him, her hand tightening around his. Through the rain, at least ten heavily armed humans came forward. One looked far stronger than the others, wielding a petrifying looking gun. He had a sadistic smirk on his marred face, his white hair plastered to his scalp.

"So," the male began in a sugar-coated tone, "you decided to take charge, how nice for you."

"Jake," Neytiri said sternly, letting go of his hand. "Leave. Take the others and go."

"No," he said, shaking his head, swallowing as he looked at the gun aimed directly at her head.

"What brave, noble people your kind are," the male said in a tone that terrified him. He hoped he looked braver than he felt. "Are you really this brave, or is it just an act? As these two have been doing for fucking weeks?" His tone had morphed into something deadly.

"Miles," Grace said, putting her hands up slowly as she came forward out of N'deh's grip. Neytiri followed suit, trying to put distance between the Avatars and the Na'vi. Grace was breathing hard. "Just let them go. Let them go. Nicole and I – we'll come with you."

"Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't ya?" he asked, licking his lips. He aimed the gun from Neytiri to Grace and back again. "Shame I can't do that. How many rules have you two broken now? Two? Five? How about we try fifty?"

Why hadn't they run the moment they could? Pleasantries could have been later. It would be a fact Ja'kanhe would dwell on for the rest of his life.

"Enjoy your last few moments of life, Moakley and Augustine," he said. Ja'kanhe's heart rate sped up, and he exchanged anxious looks with his family. Grace looked petrified. N'deh and Tzu'khan looked helpless. Neytiri looked as if she just wanted it over with. "As we speak, Wainfleet and his crew are on the lookout for you."

"Good fucking luck!" Grace exclaimed, though her voice was trembling. Her tail was quivering with fright.

"Well, it is lucky, for you," he said slowly. "For we wouldn't kill your human parts. Just your Avatars. How would that be, hmm? Fair? And

then you two can be back on the next shuttle to Earth. You are suspended without pay. Parker's orders."

"I love the fact he's using his dog to do this!" Neytiri snarled ferociously, and it obviously struck a nerve, for the male – Miles – stiffened. "Are you sure that's what he said? What is it, like, twenty million dollars between us? C'mon." She gave a laugh, looking around at the group, though no one else joined in. "What if you kill us, and you're wrong? Yikes. You can't actually expect us to believe he'd let you – "

"And yet he didn't fire Hegner when he destroyed his Avatar!" Miles spat. Neytiri's bravado had been shot in the face. Ja'kanhe exchanged looks with the rest of the clan. "Ah, yes, you remember him, don't ya? But enough's enough." The gun clicked. He knew what that meant, and Ja'kanhe watched, rooted to the spot, as Miles adjusted the weapon.

"Jake, I need you to run," Neytiri said, as Grace began to cry. He felt tears stinging his own as he looked at her, a lump forming in his throat. She slowly looked over at him, and gave him a brave smile. A tear ran down his face. She nodded at him. "It's going to be okay, my Jake."

The thunder boomed overhead.

"I'm gonna do this nice and easy," Miles smiled slowly. "I'm gonna be kind. I'm gonna count to three, give you time to prepare."

"Jake… Run!" Neytiri cried.

The human aimed the gun at Grace. She was giving shuddering sobs.

"Do not touch her!" Tzu'khan roared at the human.

"One," Miles declared, his words cutting through the air like a knife.

"Jake, please!" Neytiri screamed. "N'deh! Tzu'khan! Go! Save yourselves!"

Ja'kanhe couldn't move. He was frozen. Rooted to the spot. He saw some of the group beginning to run into the forest.

"RUN!"

"DO NOT TOUCH GRACE!" Tzu'khan yelled.

"LEAVE HER!" N'deh shouted.

"Two…" Miles gripped the gun tighter.

"Jake! My Jake! Run! Run, please!

He shook his head, and Neytiri cried out in anguish, tears now running down her cheeks.

"Three!"

Grace shut her eyes. So did Ja'kanhe.

"NO!" someone screamed.

BOOM!

He felt warm, thick blood splash over him as one of their own fell to the ground. Ja'kanhe's eyes flashed open, seeing a pool of blood spread across the floor, spreading like wildfire through the forest on the concrete. But something was wrong. It took him a moment to see past the spreading pool to recognise that there were two bodies on the floor. Grace and…

But she moved. Grace coughed and spluttered, slowly pulling herself up from under the other. She was covered in blood, shaking and gasping for breath. It was blood that didn't come from her veins.

And then he heard a terrible cry that pulled at his insides, that expressed an agony of a kind that nothing else but seeing your own brother lying there instead. And it took him a long while to realise he was the one who was screaming.

"No…! No, no, NO!" he shouted. "No, Tzu'khan, no!"

Grace was struggling to her feet, covered in blood that wasn't her own. She shook the young prince, crying her heart out. "Tzu'khan, darling, wake up…!" she yelled, but his beautiful topaz eyes were open, unseeing, the promise he had said to Grace etched upon his face as she screamed in agony.

"TZU'KHAN!" Ja'kanhe shrieked. He was hysterical, feeling as if he wasn't in control of his own body. He barely registered the bullets exploding around them.

"He is dead, Ja'kanhe! We have to leave!" Someone was pulling him, but he was fighting against them because there was no way, no chance, that Tzu'khan was dead. He suddenly realised Grace and N'deh weren't there, and they had taken off. Neytiri was the one calling to him. "We have to go! Now!"

"But he is there!" Ja'kanhe screamed, straining as hard as he could. "We have to take him, he need healer!"

"Jake, he's dead! You cannot do anything for him!"

He could hear booms and crashes but he didn't know if it was thunder or bullets. Tzu'khan couldn't be dead. If he was, surely Ja'kanhe was dead, too.

"The healer can fix him! We need to save him!" And somehow he broke out of Neytiri's grip, coming to tug at Tzu'khan's hand, trying to drag him away. "We have to! Neytiri, help me!"

"Forgive me!" she called, but he didn't understand what for.

She reached out and slapped him, her hand hitting hard against his unbruised cheek. The pain snapped him out of his daze. He looked at the body of Tzu'khan. His brother. His beloved brother. All he saw was blood, and the bullet that had Grace's name on it, in his head instead.

"RUN!" Neytiri screamed at him. "He is dead! *Dead!* I don't want you dead too!"

And then he saw the panic in her own face, panic over him getting killed. The confusion was gone, and he looked over to the humans, advancing on them, far too close for comfort now. He could see the one with the white hair loading his gun. He looked at Neytiri, recalling when she said she wouldn't know what to do if he died. And if he kept standing there, he'd fail her.

"Run!" she cried again.

Tears streaming down his face, he ran.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fourteen

It seemed over a thousand years ago that Mo'at Tsan'ten had carried her and Eytukan's infant son out of Hometree, and taken him to the river for his first blessing and acceptance into the clan. A similar motion was carried out for death, when the deceased were taken to the river for cleansing.

But she never expected to make that journey for Tzu'khan.

Silent tears pooled in her eyes as she saw the group step through the trees with one absent member. Yet he was completely missing. Her hand gripped Eytukan's arm. " *Where is he?* " Her mate's eyes asked the same question. She swallowed and stepped out of the shadow of the arch of Hometree, coming to stand in front of Neytiri and N'deh. "Where is Tzu'khan?" she questioned, swallowing.

The two exchanged looks. N'deh's ears hung low.

"Where is he?" she pressed.

Neytiri cleared her throat, and carefully stepped forward, placing her five-fingered hand on Mo'at's shoulder, but she barely touched her; she almost hovered her fingers over her skin. "I'm so sorry, my *tsahík* ," she murmured. "We couldn't…"

She didn't finish the sentence, yet there was no need. Mo'at's ears went back, the tears rolling down her cheeks now. "You could not… what? You could not bring him home? As you promised?"

" *My sister, we did everything we could* ," N'deh whispered.

Mo'at wanted to scream. She wanted to hit something. Someone. Her eyes flashed to the youngest Avatar who felt like a suitable candidate. But it wouldn't solve anything. It wouldn't bring her baby

back. Nothing she said or did would help now. She swallowed and cast her eyes over the dispirited group. She made a clicking sound with her tongue and Ja'kanhe raised his head, slowly walking over to stand beside his father and her. His eyes were still red. Neytiri pulled away from the family, stepping back to melt into the rest of the group. N'deh came over to Grace's side, taking her hand as the five of them walked away and into Hometree.

Neytiri watched them go. *I have no place here* , she realised silently. The thought slammed into her as powerfully as an AMP suit taking a swipe. It hit her right in her gut, and it was a sickening feeling. She had no place in the family's grief. She had no right to go after them. She couldn't go back to RDA. She couldn't go back to Earth. For the first time since arriving, she was unintentionally able to follow the instruction Grace had given; her mind was completely blank.

" *My leader?* " came a tentative voice. It took her several moments to realise the young warrior was speaking to her. She still held the authority as she had during the raid.

" *Yes?* " she asked softly, turning around to face the group. She realised they were waiting for instructions. She beckoned them over, putting an arm around the one who had spoken. " *I think,* " she said as they came closer, " *you go to healer. Have them check you. Understand?* "

The woman blinked, and the group walked up without her. Before they all disappeared, one of the warriors turned to her, one with a soft, round face; a comforting sight – Peyral. She walked over to Neytiri, and put a hand on her shoulder. "You do well," she told the Avatar, "for someone so… new. You save. You should be proud."

Neytiri could scarcely look her in the eye. She didn't feel proud. She felt like a failure. She saved some, yes, but lost one. One who had just moments before welcomed her into the Tsan'ten family like his own sister. She murmured a thank you, and then turned around, walking slowly through the mud and back into the dense forest.

• • •

In the healer's area, Ja'kanhe gave himself to the darkness.

The chamber inside Hometree was strategically covered by black cloth, dimming the light for the patients. It smelt of hundreds of different intermingled herbs, ointments and salves, yet he barely noticed. He hung in the balance of being awake and asleep. He would sometimes wake up and realise that they were late, they had to go and rescue Tzu'khan, only to be painfully reminded that it was he who had tried to save his brother, and there was no way to rescue Tzu'khan.

Once in a while his sleep was leaden and dreamless, and those were the best ones. For if he dreamed, he kept seeing blood spreading across the floor, he powerless to stop it flowing from Tzu'khan's forehead. Or other times he would feel a strange collection of fluid beneath him, and he'd thrash away, only to realise it was coming from him and he couldn't find the wound to staunch it. After a dream like that, he thought, *Perhaps I will die too,* and realised such a thought wasn't so terrible to him. Or perhaps he was the one who was dead, and it had been Tzu'khan who had been screaming, and screaming and screaming for him to wake up, to get up so they could take him to a healer… But then one night he encountered something different.

He had never come across such a place – it held no trees, no ferns, no vines. He couldn't hear the chirp of a bird, or the caw of an *ikran* . And as he walked, he could feel cold, unrelenting, perfectly flat ground. His eyes adjusted, and he was startled to realise that this was a human place. Petrified, he looked up and down the long grey hall, seeing human men and women walking past him in grey clothes. His heart hammered fast as he heard the roar of fire, and his nostrils quivered as he smelt the smoke, and something else that chilled him to the very bone.

Where am I? he wondered, and then realised that none of the humans were even remotely looking at him. None of them seemed to

have noticed that a towering Na'vi man was in their midst, and some walked right past him.

"Miss Moakley!" called a voice which made Ja'kanhe jump, his tail standing on end, and he gave a strangled yell that reverberated around the hall, yet still no one looked.

There she was – blue and beautiful. He breathed in relief and jogged over to her. She was dressed in grey clothing herself, but differently – she had a black overcoat on, and the grey top she donned had some golden writing on it. They were her own clothes. She stood, looming over two men who were dressed in long navy blue button coats and black pants. But when they spoke to her, they seemed to be speaking to her waist rather than her face; Ja'kanhe frowned at their rudeness, wishing he could rebuke them for staring at her in such an inappropriate manner, especially when he realised they were bending their heads down even more than necessary – their eye-line would have actually gone to just below her breasts. *I never realised humans could be that rude* , he thought, his nostrils quivering in a fury. He did his best to ignore them, and focused on her.

"Neytiri!" he said to her, relief washing over him as he touched his fingers to his forehead and then to her. He frowned when she didn't respond. "Neytiri? It is me. Ja'kanhe."

She made no acknowledgment of his presence. He reached out his four-fingered hand and waved it in front of her face. She didn't even blink. She looked like she was off in another world, staring right ahead. Her eyes looked like they were swimming with tears, but not one fell. His ears went back when he saw that.

"Neytiri? Please do not cry. It breaks my heart to see you so. What is wrong? Why are you…" Slowly, he followed her gaze; he was looking at a strange glass case. He assumed she wasn't looking at that, and took a cue from the men beside her, and glanced down.

His heart practically stopped.

She was in a large brown box. It wasn't made of wood, and it looked very thin, as if the whole purpose it served was to cause minimal damage when destroyed. What he was seeing however, was impossible. But there she lay, her cyan face paler than usual, her eyes closed as if she were dreaming. And indeed she could have been, save for the fact she wasn't breathing. That terrible scent hit his nostrils. He'd smelt it many times on animals, and a few times recently on humans and Na'vi.

Terrified, Ja'kanhe looked beside him, and she still stood there. "Neytiri…? What is this place?" he asked quietly, though he had a feeling he already knew. He looked at the woman beside him, and then the woman in the box. *How can you be standing and lying down at the same time…?*

And then it hit him.

"Your sister, Sylvia," one of the men said, still looking down in that irritating way. Ja'kanhe looked down at him, feeling as if the floor had gone from beneath his feet. "I'm sorry, there was nothing we could do."

Neytiri said nothing; she just looked straight ahead.

"How did she die?" Ja'kanhe asked, before remembering that apparently no one could see or hear him. Yet his silent question was answered:

"Unfortunately she was shot on 10th Avenue. We are trying to ascertain why she might have been there in the first place. Do you perhaps have family there?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his lover shake her head.

"All right, well we'll keep searching Miss Moakley, don't you worry 'bout that. Now, would you like to call some family before we…?" The man gestured with his hand, as if suggesting someone to enter a room.

"Nope," came the response. Ja'kanhe looked at her – it was the first time she had spoken, but she was still looking straight ahead. He had never realised how much she had changed in the short time they had known one another, but now that she spoke, he could sense and hear it – her use of words had changed, her tone had changed, her voice had changed. No longer did it carry that rough edge as she spoke now; she rounded off her words in the present. She sounded more regal, more like a leader.

The men made no move, and the two of them realised at the same time they were expecting her to continue. "No family sir. We're the last ones," she clarified.

He felt his heart rip in two for her. For the two sisters. *You're the last one?* he thought, swallowing and closing his eyes. He tried to imagine that, and couldn't. He had his parents, his uncle and aunt, his clan. To be completely alone? It was unfathomable. Hesitatingly, he reached out to find her shoulder, but touched thin air. He opened his eyes and turned to her, and found she had disappeared. Some part of him told him to glance down, and he did. His eyes widened.

In her Na'vi stead stood a human. She had dark brown skin, short cropped black hair, and as he focused on her more, he realised she was sitting. Now it made sense – she had been staring at her eyelevel at her sister's coffin; the men had been looking down at her. *This must have been what you meant when you told me you couldn't walk* , he thought, connecting the dots. Ja'kanhe bit his lip and slowly sank into a crouch, looking into her face. Her skin was oily, marred here and there by dark spots. She looked slightly malnourished. But her natural beauty was still there, in her cheekbones, in the fire in her eyes. He glanced over to the coffin, and saw the same human face staring out at him. He sighed and reached out, trying to take her hand that rested upon the chair with wheels she sat in. She didn't react. He was fairly sure she couldn't feel it, but he continued to hold, anyway. Her skin was scarily cold.

His ears flickered as he heard another man come over, dressed in that same grey clothing which he took to be the uniform of this place.

He unnecessarily crawled out of the way as the man came forward, covering the coffin with a lid. Straps were then pulled around it to secure it, as if it were about to travel on a long journey, but all that happened was that it slid forward on a strange moving platform, and into a hole in the wall. The burners were lit. He growled and moved away from the flames, though came to the conclusion it couldn't touch him; Neytiri just stared right ahead. His ears went back and he gently rested his chin on her shoulder, kissing her cheek softly. "I am sorry, Ney Ney," he murmured. He didn't care if she couldn't hear.

The men allowed her a moment of silence and then said, "Your sister represented a significant investment. We'd like to talk to you about taking over her contract."

Ja'kanhe whipped around to them, giving a ferocious snarl. How dare they? How dare they bring up such issues when she was grieving? Their concern was touching. He wished they could hear him so he could roar at them to leave her alone. But she remained stoic, and they remained unable to hear.

He sighed in frustration, and looked down the other end of the hall. What did they call this place? A morgue? He had a feeling Grace may have mentioned it, or it came up in a human book. Now he realised why he smelt death and fire. He shuddered, and then saw something that made his heart skip a beat.

He rose to his feet slowly. The men were still talking to Neytiri. He looked at her, and then forward, completely torn. He blinked a few times to be sure, and then looked at her. She was now moving in her chair with wheels, and the men were walking with her, beginning to lead the way in the opposite direction he wanted to go. His decision was made for him. "I be back, all right?" he whispered to her. "I just need time. I be back. Baby, I promise." Her face turned towards him, and he took a sharp intake of breath as her brown eyes looked up and right at him. A coincidence? She stared directly at him, and blinked slowly.

"Miss Moakley?" one of the men asked, and she turned around, as if the past few moments hadn't happened.

He watched her catch up with the men, and then he turned and sprinted in the other direction.

"Tzu'khan!" he yelled across the hall, his voice echoing in the silence. *There he is* , he breathed, running fast towards the lone blue figure at the end of the hall. His feet pounded painfully against the concrete. But it felt like he was running in quicksand – he was running as fast as he could, and yet his brother was no closer to him.

His eyesight was growing unfocused. He glanced around; the hall was dissolving as if it were made of smoke. Everything was fading; he could only see his own body – all else was swirling darkness…

And then his vision returned. His eyes had to adjust to the new scene around him, but it was easier this time – it was home. He looked around him and breathed in relief as he saw the outline of the forest, felt the mud squelching between his toes. He could hear the babble of the river, the whicker of the *pa'li* , and he knew that if he turned around…

" *You're no better than them, do you know that?* " Hometree was there, and sure enough, Tzu'khan. Ja'kanhe beamed widely as he saw his brother storm out from the arch, closely followed by his mother and father. And him. He blinked as he saw himself follow out, and realised, with a start, what this was. He felt strange gazing upon himself, and he could tell instantly that he was younger – this Ja'kanhe had thick hair all over his head, and not as elaborately decorated clothing. His mother and father looked drained, but slightly younger, and Tzu'khan – he was carrying arrows and both of his bows – his training and the one given to him as he became second-in-command – and a woven bag on his back. The older Ja'kanhe looked around him, seeing the rest of the clan flanking the area, as they had on that fateful day. *Why do I have to see this again?* he wondered, sighing sadly.

He watched as his mother ran forward, leaving his younger self and their father standing in the shadows, so she could grab him by the arm. Tears were streaming down her face. " *Please Tzu'khan! Grace is gone now, you don't have to worry about that anymore!* "

" *You honestly think Grace is the problem?* " Tzu'khan raged. His eyes were furious, and he rounded on their mother to say something harsh. Though his head was turned which made hearing harder, Ja'kanhe didn't have to listen to know what was said: " *If she was, you should have done the world a favour and put an arrow through her!* "

Ja'kanhe watched as his younger self snarled in anger, and their father quickly grabbed him back. " *Give me one good shot!* " younger Ja'kanhe roared, struggling hard against his father, his tail swiping dangerously. " *I am willing to do the time!* "

" *Do not even bother, little brother! Where was that anger when it was needed on the raid, huh?* " Older Ja'kanhe swallowed, chewing his lip.

" *Don't drag him into this!* " Mo'at yelled, her wrists quaking as she struggled against Tzu'khan. " *Don't you dare drag him into this! Please, darling…* " She bit her lip and straightened up, clearing her throat. She gave a watery smile which broke Ja'kanhe's heart as he saw it from this angle. " *Please. Stop this foolishness. Let's go inside and – and forget the whole thing.* "

It had been the wrong thing to say. Ja'kanhe wished he had ear-lids because he knew what was coming. He looked around for signs of escape, for he didn't want to do this again, but the clan were closed around too much for him to walk out and disappear into the forest.

Tzu'khan stared at his mother, gaping at her. " ' *Forget the whole thing'."* It wasn't a question. He echoed her words, his tail flicking from side to side in thick, sharp movements. He bared down on her. " *Let. Me. Go.* "

" *Tzu'khan, stop this!* " he heard his father say, but Eytukan didn't move as he was still restraining a young Ja'kanhe. Older Ja'kanhe knew, with a pang in his heart, that now he wasn't trying to escape the grip to harm his brother, but to go after him. Eytukan kept a firm grip as he said, " *Stop being selfish, for once!* "

" *Shut up, Father* ." The words came through crystal clear. There was a collective gasp from the clan behind him as everyone realised what had been said. Even Tzu'khan seemed to realise he had taken that too far as Eytukan stared at him, astounded. But Tzu'khan recovered quickly, and looked their mother; she was too shocked to keep a firm hold on him, and he easily yanked his wrist out of her grip. He cleared his throat. " *I'm letting you all be as selfish as you want, too. Don't forget that in a hurry.* "

Tzu'khan turned on his heel and marched out. The clan parted easily for him to walk through. Older Ja'kanhe didn't move though, for he remembered what was coming.

Mo'at sank to her knees in the mud and sobbed, a heart-wrenching sound. Several members rushed forward, tears in their own eyes too as they came to help her, brushing her off and letting her cry. Some others ran forward too to attend to Eytukan, amongst them a younger Tsu'tei, tears streaming down her face. Older Ja'kanhe swallowed as he realised she ignored the leaders and went directly to his struggling younger self, trying to hug him.

" *Let me go!* " younger Ja'kanhe snarled as he pushed off. Older Ja'kanhe now saw the consequences of that, as due to him being stronger, he had accidentally pushed the young girl into the dirt, which no one else seemed to notice. His ears went back, and he began to walk to help, but something in him told him to follow himself as he heard his father telling his warriors, " *I will get him.* "

"I am sorry, Tsu'tei," he said, and just as Neytiri had done, she looked directly at the older him, just for a moment, before she looked away. He watched as Eytukan began to walk into the forest to find his youngest son. The present him breathed and chased after the

disappearing figures of his brother and his seventeen year old self, moving past his father. He tore through the forest, his feet hitting the soft moss. He saw himself run to the right, but he knew that had been a mistake in the past, so he ran to the left. He jumped over logs and ran through the cool ponds that had collected in wells after the rains. He kept his nose to the air, but he knew he was doing a thoroughly terrible job of tracking Tzu'khan. Some instinct told him to move quickly, just trust his body, move…

Beep! Beep!

He frowned, stopping hard in his tracks. The sharp scent of metal hit his nose.

"Shit," he growled, before giving a laugh; Neytiri had rubbed off on him. His smile quickly ebbed as he comprehended where he was. This was dangerous. He sighed, and began to turn away, deciding to put as much distance between that dreadful place and himself as possible.

"You found me." He whirled around, and glanced up, seeing two strong legs dangling from above. He carefully walked forward, and under the low bough of a tree, and found Tzu'khan sitting there, hands lazily behind him, looking straight ahead.

"Tzu'khan…" Ja'kanhe glanced around him, and then spotted the trunk of the tree, which he hastily climbed. He walked across the natural bridge, and crouched down next to Tzu'khan. His brother said nothing. Just as he had done with Neytiri, he put his hand forward, and waved it in front of Tzu'khan's face.

He hadn't been prepared for his brother's hand to fly out and grip his wrist.

His heart pounded as a wry smile appeared on Tzu'khan's face. He slowly turned to Ja'kanhe, who suddenly got the impression that there might be blood, a bullet wound… He looked down until Tzu'khan said, " *It's me, you moron.* "

He opened his eyes and looked at his brother. It was his present brother. Not a year younger. Just as he had been… however long it had been since that fateful day. Ja'kanhe felt a lump form in his throat, and he slowly reached out with his fingers. Tzu'khan closed his eyes as he let his little brother make sure it was really him, tracing him with his fingertips as he had done when he was a toddler. " *Tzu'khan… it is you.* "

There was no longer a trace of humour. His brother nodded. " *Yes.* "

Ja'kanhe's ears drooped, and he bore down the scratchiness in his throat. " *Where are you?* "

" *I had to go away.* "

" *But…* " He felt like a little child, begging to know everything would be all right. " *Don't you miss me? Miss us?* "

Tzu'khan gave a sad smile, his own ears going down. " *Every day.* "

Ja'kanhe dragged his eyes away, looking forward to the dreaded place. He looked at the concrete monstrosity, seeing the people moving around, doing their daily work. He thought he heard yells in the distance. He breathed out shakily. " *Why are we here again?* " he asked.

Tzu'khan didn't respond, but continued to watch forwards. Ja'kanhe peered through the foliage, past the fence and the people working on the ground. His keen eyesight looked into the windows, and saw harsh gestures; the yelling was coming from there. Two people were arguing.

" *Who is that?* "

In the way that Neytiri had always accused him of being the 'most annoying thing on the planet', Tzu'khan answered with a question: " *Who do you think?* "

He listened in harder. One voice was distinctly female, and the other male. He paid closer attention, his eyes alighting on a tall woman wearing a shapeless coat, her short hair in curls around her face, and a muscular man, pointing and shouting at her. When she spoke again, he picked up the silvery tone of Grace, and then when he spoke, Ja'kanhe recognised the gravelly voice of… " *Him.* "

Tzu'khan nodded slowly. " *Yes. I watched them arguing for hours before I headed to the other clan. If you had taken the correct turn, you would have caught up with me then.* "

" *I wouldn't have convinced you to return though, would I?* " Tzu'khan shook his head in response, as Ja'kanhe had known. He had a feeling that Tzu'khan's leaving had had to happen, but if he could have had that extra year with him, he would have taken it in the heartbeat. He tilted his chin to the arguing. " *Why did you watch them?* "

His brother gave a deep, throaty laugh. " *You know… for all my supposed hatred, as I told you, I never really wanted Grace dead, or anything negative towards her. And there was some part that told me to see how she was before I left. So I came here, and saw this, and I immediately wanted to protect her… but someone beat me to it.* " His eyes cast over to a corner of the fencing, where large blue crates lay. Ja'kanhe's was taken aback as he saw his uncle N'deh, crouched upon it, an arrow already notched to his bow, and he knew that if Miles Quaritch had tried anything against his mate, he would have paid for it. " *Obviously, there was no physical altercation, but if there had been, she would have started it.* "

Tzu'khan seemed to be very contemplative for a moment, before saying, " *Kind of poetic, isn't it? He shoots Akwey, and then me.* "

Ja'kanhe swallowed, looking at his brother. Tzu'khan looked back as if to say 'Yes', before his eyes cast over the top of his younger brother's head; a gentle smile came over his face.

"My Jake? I think it's time to go."

He turned around, and there was his Neytiri. She smiled warmly at him, her braided hair moving gently as a breeze came through. She was back in her clan clothing, but he noticed a cape draped around her shoulders, eerily similar to the one his mother wore…

As he frowned but before he could question it, Tzu'khan said, "I think it is." His strong hand clasped on Ja'kanhe's shoulder. "Be safe."

Ja'kanhe looked at him desperately, his face practically begging, *No, just a little longer…* But something told him he had to go. Tzu'khan opened his arms to give him a hug, and Ja'kanhe reciprocated. "Will I see you again?" he asked.

Tzu'khan thought about this for a moment. "Yes," he finally answered, but the hope that flared in Ja'kanhe's heart was extinguished as he added, "but not for many years. *Do not forget – I am always with you. I will be in the summer rain, in the cool breeze that freshens the forest. I will fly beside you when you do, and I will guide your arrows. I will be the lights you see in the flora, I will be the stars in the sky. And perhaps, one day, I will be reflected in the faces of your children. But not for a long time. She told me, She has a lot planned for you. And you.* "

He directed the end at Neytiri, who smiled at him. "Take care of my brother, my sister," Tzu'khan asked her, and she bowed her head.

"I will."

• • •

Neytiri's eyes flashed open as she felt movement near her. She looked up as Ja'kanhe turned over in the hammock, in a gentler manner than usual, and then his own eyes opened to look at her. She breathed in relief, a smile coming to her lips.

She heard him swallow, and then he asked, his voice hoarse, "Is it really you?"

Her bright topaz eyes looked over him in the darkness of the healer's area. "Yes," she replied, sending up a prayer to Eywa, thanking Her. She reached forward to put her hand on his forehead, and nodded, taking his hand in her own. "Your fever has broken."

He frowned. "I am sick?"

"You were," she said anxiously. It had been a rough few days. The healers had assumed the grief had gotten to him more physically than anything else, and Grace had said, as she sponged his forehead, that the shock of the situation had caused his body to close off as his brain processed.

He slowly tried to sit up, and she quickly put her hand on the small of his back to steady him as he groaned from the exertion. "Don't try to do too much," she advised quickly, squeezing his hand.

"How long?" he asked, his voice still crackly.

"Long enough," she answered, standing up from him. She turned around and moved to a corner of the room, feeling around in the darkness.

"Where are you going?" he asked; he sounded very frightened. "Please do not go…"

"Hey, hey, I'm here," she murmured, quickly grabbing the water bowl and hurrying back to him. "It's okay, I'm here, I'm not going anywhere. I just wanted to bring you some water." She put the carved bowl to his lips and he took a sip, before realising how thirsty he really was and took it from her hands to drink himself.

Once he was done, he slowly lay back down, coughing slightly. In the darkness, his eyes and body glowed, and she saw him looking at her. "I saw you," he whispered.

A light smile played on her features, and she gave a laugh. "I see you, too," she responded.

"No…" He frowned and shook his head. "No, I saw you. And your sister."

Neytiri felt the smile melt away from her face like snow melting under the sun. She felt him sluggishly reach out for her hand again, and once he found it, he brought it to her lips to kiss her knuckle. "I saw… you. And your sister. When she… died."

She felt a strange catch in her throat, and she quickly looked away, focusing on their glowing hands. "I wish… I could have saved her… for you."

She slowly brought her eyes back up to him again, and sighed, leaning in to brush some hair away from his forehead. "You did not know me, or her. We were in different worlds. It would have been impossible to do such a thing."

In the darkness, she could see his forehead knitting together. "Is there anything I could do for you…? Did you… want to talk about it?"

She looked at him in shock. Had he forgotten?

"We both… lost siblings," he said, and she heard him swallow. He hadn't forgotten. Was this a coping mechanism? Making someone else talk about their loss?

She gestured, and he moved over on the hammock. She came to lie beside him, ignoring his slightly rancid scent as he had been out for a couple of days. She looked at him seriously, and gave a smile. "It means the world to me to hear you say that. Truly," she whispered, patting his hand. "But would you not benefit from… talking about yourself? How you're feeling?"

He slowly shook his head. He looked desperately like he wanted to help her and not himself. "Is there not anything I could do?" he asked, almost begging her to let him help her.

A slow smile came to her. She wrapped him in her arms, letting him rest his head on her chest. Her tail sought his own, and she felt him relax; he was very comforted by that, which made her wonder what he had seen. She swallowed her own tears down, and kissed the top of his head. "Sweetie," she said, "we cannot prevent what we cannot predict."

He felt very heavy on her as he relaxed. He yawned and murmured, "You are very wise… You sound different…" But she didn't get to ask him what he meant as he fell back to sleep.

• • •

Neytiri pushed the top of the link chamber open, and immediately fell out of it.

"What the fuck?" she asked, rubbing a spot on her head where it had hit the floor, before she heard a yelp nearby; Grace had been physically knocked out of hers.

Neytiri quickly snapped her defences on, balling her fists, ready to do her best to give whoever it was pulling them out hell, but she realised there was no one. Grace looked around, her hair bedraggled, just as confused as she was.

"Sorry ladies, you are flying Air Pandora and it is a bit of a bumpy ride as we make our ascent," came a cool voice over the intercom. "In English, I'm not great at take-off with a shack attached."

"Trudy?" Grace asked spastically. She rose to her feet, rubbing her hip, and made her way over to the large windows on the side. Her eyes widened and she banged on the window; Neytiri could only assume she was looking at the Hallelujah Mountains floating past. Grace looked up to the ceiling and snarled. "Hey! Put my house back down where it was!"

There was a pause. "You call that a house?" came Norm's voice over the intercom next.

Neytiri growled in her throat as the shack moved. "Guys! What the hell?!"

"Just saving your asses, sorry." The scientist and the marine whirled around to see Marcia come through from the corner of the shack; they had been so preoccupied with their respective pains that they hadn't noticed her, looking so relaxed seeing as she knew exactly what was going on.

"Pre-warning, motherfucker. Do you understand that?" Grace groaned, still massaging her hip. She looked at it as if she could see through the fabric of her pants. "Gonna have a wicked bruise…"

"Never mind that!" Neytiri exclaimed, frowning so hard it was giving her a headache as she looked at Marcia. She gestured around as Grace came to help her up, putting her hands under her armpits and hoisting her up as if she were a child. "Care to explain?"

"Miles has all the communication lines tapped," Marcia explained, coming to Neytiri's aid as well by opening her wheelchair. They helped settle her in before she continued. "We wanted to tell you that he found you and was sending a convoy around to arrest you in an hour but we didn't get the chance."

Neytiri's frown disappeared, and she looked at Grace, who was equally worried. "What's happening down there?" she asked.

"It's pandemonium," Marcia said through gritted teeth. "He beat Parker to the ground – figuratively – to get him to hand over the ammunition from the mining. Parker said no, so Miles beat him to the ground – literally. Now he has all the explosive power…"

"… to destroy Hometree," Neytiri finished, hissing through her teeth. She looked at Marcia. "How long?"

"A day, two, tops," Marcia said, looking extremely worried. "We were hoping you had a plan once we put you down."

Neytiri and Grace exchanged looks. She threw her hands up in the air. "As you might have heard," Grace muttered, "our plan failed."

Marcia was silent for a moment, before looking seriously at them. "I am sorry for your loss. We did hear." Grace looked out the window.

"Where is Tzu'khan's body?" Neytiri asked. There was silence. Marcia looked at the floor. "Marcia?"

The *crack!* of the intercom came on and Norm said, "Ladies, I… I don't really know how to say this. But… we're pretty sure they burnt it."

Grace clutched at her heart; Neytiri felt like she was going to be sick. " 'Pretty sure'?" she echoed, hoping. "So we're not certain?"

There was silence. "Let's just say there was a lot more smoke coming from the infirmary than usual."

Neytiri clamped her teeth together. She took steadying breaths. Now she knew what people meant when they said they heard a swarm of locusts buzzing in their ears right before they fainted. "We can't tell Mo'at that," she told Grace, who gave a curt nod. The body hadn't been cleansed, and the Na'vi didn't burn their people. As was their religion, and their land space, they buried them. Buring someone was similar to the fires of Hell. Neytiri was fairly certain Mo'at would suffer a nervous breakdown.

"I'm sorry guys, but I gotta ask," Trudy spoke again, "do we have a plan?"

Neytiri rubbed her face, and put her elbows on the armrests of her chair. She slumped back in it after. "No," she said, admitting defeat.

• • •

Tzu'khan's funeral was later that day.

Once he had awoken from his stupor, Ja'kanhe had struggled into the river for a bath with Neytiri's help, and she guided him to the rest of the clan once he was presentable. His mother and father were joyous to see him well, but Neytiri knew that joy was dampened by what was to come.

They met by the west of the tree. Grace stood, solemn and silent as a statue, beside N'deh, as they waited for the rest of the Tsan'ten's to join them. The clan, Tihawnu, Zuleika and their people, stood around them, the only movement from a gentle southerly breeze.

"He is around," Ja'kanhe whispered to Neytiri, and she rubbed his arm and nodded. She could feel it, too. Everyone seemed to feel his presence as they walked to the meeting spot.

But there was no body. There would be no traditional burial. As promised, Grace and Neytiri kept mum; she didn't even tell Ja'kanhe. Seeing as they couldn't have the burial, Mo'at had thought it best for them to say prayers at Hometree, and then have a pilgrimage to the Tree of Souls. Grace was too miserable to even become remotely excited at the fact that she was being welcomed to their most sacred place for the first time in her life, though Neytiri did hear her mutter, "On another day, I'll bring my vials to get samples", and saw N'deh smile and kiss her for that comment.

Neytiri kept close to Ja'kanhe, allowing him to take her hand or tail if he needed it. He just kept to himself and looked straight ahead; she guessed he needed to be as alone as he could be right now. Mo'at was chanting some prayers, though she seemed to not be paying as much attention as usual as Neytiri noticed she said the same sentence twice or thrice in the same prayer; no one held it against her. Her mate stood right next to her, instead of in the middle of the group, and held her hand. The two of them had tears in their eyes, but not one fell.

Grace was breathing hard as they got closer. She had never felt so nervous. She didn't calm when N'deh squeezed her hand and whispered, "You can do it." *I don't know if I can* , she thought. What if

she made a mistake? What if she failed Tzu'khan…? *Why did I agree to this?*

All too soon, Mo'at turned to her and said, " *Grace will now say a few words.* "

N'deh gave a final comforting hold of her hand, and then let go. She was on her own now. She could feel all the eyes on her as she walked to stand beside her sister-in-law. Mo'at looked at her with what she could only describe as thankfulness and family love. The look gave her some strength.

She cleared her throat and faced the clan, most of the eyes on her. Not all of them, but it was enough to make her heart pound. "Uh… *hello* ," she said, feeling so out of place. The Avatar speaking at Tzu'khan's funeral. *I wonder how many are blaming me* , she dangerously wondered, but quickly pushed it out of her mind. She looked over the sea of blue, and saw many different things – the gentle breeze which ruffled Eytukan's feathers; the way Mo'at's hands shook; the way tears collected in N'deh's eyes, but he didn't cry; how Ja'kanhe now reached down to grasp Neytiri's hand; and in Neytiri's free hand floated a glowing *atokirina.* Grace bit her lip as she looked at it, bobbing gently in her palm. She looked up, and in Neytiri's face was the real strength she got. The girl who had been almost like a daughter to her over the short time they had known one another. The girl who had promised so much, and delivered as best as she could. The girl who had turned into a woman in such a short time, and exceeded expectations. And the one who looked at her now, with a look in her eyes that said, *You've got this* , with all the earnestness she had.

She nodded at Neytiri, who dipped her head. Grace cleared her throat once more and said, " *I was not going to make a speech. Funerals are too much for the living. But this is Tzu'khan's special day, and I want him to hear his favourite story. And no, it's not a human one – I didn't influence him enough on that.* " There was some laughter, and Grace gave a smile, before reciting it from heart. She had told it to him enough times when he had been a boy. She

did her best to keep her voice as steady as possible. " *Tzu'khan's grandfather's grandfather was the Rider of the Last Shadow.* " There was some murmurings as everyone realised which story she was telling.

Neytiri listened as Grace retold the story, in more vivid detail than she had ever heard. Ja'kanhe had told it to her, but she had never heard the complete unabridged version. She enjoyed the picture Grace painted with the brush of her words – how the man had tried to tame an *ikran* , but the *toruk* snarled and scratched the *ikran* away from him, demanding to become his mount. Yet his female counterpart had not been impressed – the entire first flight, she had stayed hazardously close, cawing to get her hunting companion's attention, and when that hadn't worked, tried physically hurting him which caused aggravation between the two. When she had tried to draw him back to her, as a mate rather than a friend, he rejected her completely, choosing to stay with his newfound Na'vi friend. The female stayed close for weeks and weeks, but then finally, out of a broken heart, gave up, and plunged herself off a cliff. Distraught but with nothing else left in his life, the male stayed with his Na'vi. He was never completely the same, but remained loyal to his friend until his death, at which point the *toruk* finally gave in to his crippling sadness, and passed away himself…

Neytiri frowned as she looked around. She looked to her left, and to her right, completely zoning out from the story. Someone was missing. She sighed as she realised, and held onto Ja'kanhe's hand.

"… *and the moral of the story is: if you can work together with your enemies, and see their good sides, rather than fight them, well, then you have achieved the highest success, and hopefully, the best happiness. And Tzu'khan, I hope you liked that…* "

Neytiri looked at Grace as she stepped down, tears falling now as she came back to stand beside N'deh, who whispered, " *Well done* ". Ja'kanhe looked at Neytiri for a moment, before taking his hand back and walking to the front. His turn. Neytiri chewed her lip, and waited for him to start on some of his memories of Tzu'khan. He began with

a funny story of how when they were children, Tzu'khan convinced him that there was a playful sea *ikran* in the sea to convince him to go for a swim with the other children, and once everyone was laughing, Neytiri sought the distraction and slipped out.

She walked back towards the main part of Hometree, and began to ascend the spiral stairs. She put her nose to the air, sniffing, until she came across who she was looking for.

Tsu'tei sat on the sill-like branch of Hometree, overlooking the funeral below. She was gnawing gently on her fingernail, her knees up near her chest. Neytiri leaned against the entrance frame of the area, and cleared her throat so she didn't startle the young girl too much; it didn't matter, Tsu'tei still gasped in shock and looked over. Upon seeing her, Tsu'tei slouched and put her head on her knees. "Hello," she greeted.

Neytiri nodded at her. "Hello yourself," she replied. Without permission, she crossed the room and came to lean against the wall beside Tsu'tei; the girl didn't protest. She didn't even give a snappy remark. Neytiri got right to the point. "Why aren't you at the funeral?"

Tsu'tei gave a dark laugh and looked at her, her eyes, too, swimming with unshed tears. "Would you believe if I say I feel… intrusive?" she asked, rocking gently on her haunches.

Neytiri eyed her for a long moment, before looking back down to the scene and saying, "No. Because I feel the same way, truth be told."

"Is that why you are here?"

"Actually, no. I came looking for you."

Tsu'tei looked as if she was questioning whether she was part of a joke. Her eyes then narrowed shrewdly, and she pulled back from her knees, looking the Avatar up and down. "Why?"

Neytiri made the strange movement of rising her shoulders up and then letting them drop. "I thought you should be there. They're your family. He's your family. Don't you want to say goodbye?"

Tsu'tei continued to watch her, trying to ascertain why she was here. Surely she was joking? Why would she care where she was? Perhaps it was the sadness of the day, or the slow but sure lump forming in her throat, that Tsu'tei admitted, "I can't."

Neytiri slowly sat down on the sill herself, looking at her. There wasn't a trace of mirth in her face. "Why?"

"Because I…" She sighed. "I am not family. I do not belong."

"Tsu'tei, how could you say that? You are family. You're going to be a Tsan'ten and – "

"Cut the bullshit." The words shocked Neytiri so much she felt as if she had been slapped with a whip across the face. She hadn't even been aware Tsu'tei knew that word. The young girl looked squarely at her, her jaw clenched. "Ja'kanhe wants you. He always did." She leaned back on the sill, and looked down at the scene. "He always did… I knew from the moment I saw you and he together."

Neytiri could have said many things. She could have denied it, but she didn't want to. Because she wanted him too. She breathed out. "I'm sorry, Tsu'tei. Really."

The young girl sniffed and shook her head. "Oh… do not apologise. Honestly." She looked at the Avatar, the one she had hated for so long, lost so much sleep over, stressed about constantly. Where had it gotten them? She was living her worst nightmare, and that was the funny part – she was *living.* "We would not have work. I had… strong suspicion for a while that Eywa would say no. *So it goes.* "

Neytiri chewed the inside of her cheek. "I am still sorry."

"Neytiri, I cannot believe I say this, but I should thank you." When the Avatar looked so shocked, Tsu'tei blinked. She was serious. "I think you wake the clan up. Show them… times change. I never love Ja'kanhe, and he never love me. We never would have. We would have been unhappy for a cause." She drooped her head, breathing out shakily. "Tzu'khan spoke to me… just before he die. He tell me that I am not defined by who I marry. That I am my own person. Do you think that is true?"

For the second time that day, Neytiri found herself looking into the eyes of someone who wanted so badly for her to tell them that it would be all right. And this time, she felt certain. "I do," she told her. "I genuinely do."

"I just… feel like all my life has been built up and now…" She threw her hands up as if she were throwing up the cards of her life.

Neytiri sighed. "You know, you might find this strange, but I kind of know how you feel."

Tsu'tei tilted her head. "How?"

"When I was your age – "

"You are my age."

She gave a flicker of a smile. "No, Tsu'tei, I'm not. I'm actually ten years older. Avatars are always younger." Tsu'tei looked like she didn't know how to respond to that. "But when I was your age, I had the whole world on a plate. I was a marine, I was doing well. There was talk I would become, well, a leader of that. But then… I was shot. I couldn't move any longer on my own. And my dreams were shot to hell.

"And I thought, 'My life is over.' And for years, I genuinely believed that. I didn't really look after myself. I was just waiting for the day it could all end. But then… it ended for my sister." Tsu'tei's face crumpled, her ears going back. "And she was the one who was

meant to be here. Instead, I am. I got this fantastic second chance and I'm going to do it better. What I'm saying, Tsu'tei," she said, dropping her voice so the girl had to really listen. "Is that your life builds. And builds and builds. Sometimes parts of it get knocked down but that does not under any circumstances mean you can't rebuild. And you? I absolutely know you could."

Tsu'tei stared, enraptured, at the Avatar. She swallowed. "I am sorry about your sister."

Neytiri breathed and shrugged. "It's life."

There was a long silence between them. "I... I was not born in the clan," Tsu'tei slowly began, looking down as if the words of her life story were tattooed on her feet. "I was born in another country, far away. One day, my father get sick. Really, really sick. We had never seen anything like it.

"Every day. Every day, closer to the day, we thought we lose him, my mother take me in to see him. And she say, 'No tears. Daddy want smiles. You cry, you cannot see him.'" Neytiri stared at her, swallowing. "So on that last night… I force myself to smile. He lay there and he was not breathing but I thought he still see me. So I kept smiling..." She forced a smile then, but it crumpled as the memory took over. "All night. I did not stop. I was five."

Neytiri closed her eyes, feeling a burning sensation in her heart. "Oh my God…"

"When he die, I thought I had my mother. I would be all right. But she died, too, when I was six. Some say of a broken heart. So I was left… All alone." Tsu'tei breathed out shakily, a tear running down her cheek. "I began to walk. And walk. I did not stop. It was… by chance Eytukan and some warriors found me and took me in. Else I would not be here to tell you. And Mo'at, she took me under her wing and…" Tsu'tei sniffed and smiled, tears still pooling in her eyes. "You know the rest. And I know I should not have anger, or anything… But I never stopped feeling my mother left me, alone, for a man. And I

never forget that. And it is silly, but I never forgive him for leaving and causing that."

Neytiri reached out slowly, putting her hand on Tsu'tei's, her thumb rubbing over it in comfort. "I am so sorry, Tsu'tei."

Tsu'tei straightened up and then leaned forward, looking deep into her eyes. "Neytiri… listen to me," she began, brushing away unshed tears, and Neytiri was shocked to see how scared the girl looked. How determined at the same time. She pricked her ears forward, and listened carefully as Tsu'tei strongly said, "I do not want my life based around a man I do not love. Based… on marriage. I do not want that. I want to do… more. But I feel I cannot… In this life, anyway."

Tsu'tei looked down at her feet, and Neytiri felt her ears go down. "Because you do not want this life to be a waste."

"Is that so terrible?" she asked nervously.

"Of course not!" Neytiri exclaimed, a little louder than she intended, but she did something she never thought she would do – she elicited a smile from Tsu'tei.

"I never tell anyone… Thank you."

"For what, Tsu'tei?"

"For not saying 'You will be happy with someone one day'. Or I could not do it. They would."

She wasn't sure if she agreed with that, but she could understand the fear; Neytiri slowly nodded. "You're welcome." They shared a look, and then both looked down below to the proceedings. Ja'kanhe had finished his speech, and the lilting voices of the clan reached their ears as they sang a hymn. "I think his death affected all of us more than we are willing to admit."

"Yes," Tsu'tei agreed softly. "I think we become aware of how life can just be taken away."

Neytiri felt her tail grow taught, and her heart grow louder in her ears. She had to tell her. "The humans are going to blow up Hometree."

To her surprise, Tsu'tei rolled her eyes. "We are finally connecting and you bring up that."

"Tsu'tei, I am talking in the next two days."

Now she had her interest: the girl robotically turned her head to face her, looking unsure what to say or how to react. She slowly disentangled herself, looking as deflated as if someone had taken a rod and poked a hole in a water gourd. "But… the raid… you – "

" – failed," Neytiri finished bitterly, looking down as the group began to move away from Hometree. She saw Ja'kanhe looking around, trying to find her, and she edged herself away from view, focusing on Tsu'tei. "We failed, Tsu'tei. What makes you think we stopped them?"

" *Oh my…* " Tsu'tei's eyes widened and she looked at the Avatar, hoping to Eywa she had a plan. "Please say you – "

"Have a plan?" Neytiri asked, to which the girl blinked. She slowly stood to her feet, and offered her hand out to Tsu'tei, which she hesitatingly took. Once they were both standing, Neytiri slowly walked them out of the room. She licked her lips as she thought. "As a matter of fact, I do. Sometimes your whole life boils down to one insane move. And, *my sister* , I'm going to need your help."

• • •

"You are crazy!" Tsu'tei screamed at her over the whip of the winds. She clung around tightly to Neytiri's middle, the cold air rushing over their skin, goose pimples rising. The *ikran* below them beat his wings, gliding through the air effortlessly. He had no problems in the sky, which was more than could be said for the two of them.

"Been told that, multiple times – now hang on, I need to stand," she called, and Tsu'tei quickly let go of her and gripped, terrified, onto the *ikran* whilst Neytiri balanced like a gymnast on her feet on the back of the creature. She flicked the two woven ropes around, and passed one to Tsu'tei, who stretched out a trembling hand to reach it.

"How come you're so petrified? Don't you have an *ikran* ?" Neytiri yelled out to her.

"No!" Tsu'tei yelled back, sounding indignant, her eyes wide. "I am not warrior! I train for *tsahík* and nothing else!"

"But… doesn't Mo'at have an *ikran* ?" Neytiri called back as she continued to balance easily, her queue connected to her *ikran* . She thought ' *Turn left* ', and he did, moving past the *ikran* rookery, where some of his past flock mates called out to him; he didn't reply as he moved to a more open field, away from the mountains.

Tsu'tei would have rolled her eyes if she wasn't terrified of losing the much too large goggles Neytiri had scrounged up for her. "Where do you get your facts? No! She's not a warrior!"

Slowly, the idea that this might be the worst plan she had ever thought of started to occur to Neytiri. "Huh," she said, slowly getting Tsu'tei to stand; the girl clung to her like a cat trying to get away from the water, unsteady on her feet. Her *ikran* yelped in protest as he was trod on. "So, I uh, guess I really picked the wrong person."

"Really? What alerted you?" Tsu'tei snarled sarcastically.

Neytiri glanced down, and her eyes spotted exactly what she was looking for. "You know," she said casually, looking behind to her companion, "I do not know why we were not friends from the start. We have the same dry humour."

"Keep your eyes to the front!" Tsu'tei yelled, feeling her heart pound in her chest, even more so when she heard the Avatar laugh. "And

maybe that was because you are crazy!" she exclaimed, her sentence ending in a growl.

"Yes, yes, you've told me," Neytiri muttered, her words taken away by the wind. "Now then, you know how to make *tsaheylu?* "

Tsu'tei said nothing, but just looked at her, her lips pursed and her eye ridge cocked.

"Just asking! Now think of it like a horse, except this horse is in the sky, and far more intelligent."

"Congratulations, I feel so much better," Tsu'tei shivered, the cold wind and the nerves getting to her more and more. She wasn't sure if she was in control of her own body. She looked down into the dark sea of green, and then saw what Neytiri had been looking at:

The huge creature of red and gold with a blue head crest circled below. The large shadow it cast swooped over the lands, sending animals below scurrying for their life.

Tsu'tei swallowed and looked at Neytiri. Their hair whipped in the breeze. She gave a small smile. "If one of us dies…"

Neytiri gave a smile in return. "We won't."

I wish I could be that certain , she thought, swallowing. She looked down. They were hovering the height of two Na'vi above the *toruk* . It was really high for her, but Neytiri had pointed out if they got too close, her *ikran* would be easily heard, and the *toruk* could turn around and rip them with its teeth. *Now or never* , Tsu'tei thought, her heart pounding. She felt like she was going to faint, but the idea that if she did, she would die, quickly caused her body to come back into focus. *Just push off. You can do it! Take charge of your life! Jump! Now! Now! Now…!*

Neytiri glanced up as she heard a spine-chilling caw. "Tsu'tei, that's your signal!" she yelled as she looked up. The second shadow

screamed at her, folding its wings and beginning a dive. If it got too close, it would alert its partner. It dived in. Neytiri's *ikran* screamed in fright, trying to fly harder which was going to put distance between them and the *toruk* . "Now would be a good time!"

Tsu'tei was frozen. The scream of the second *toruk* had shattered her nerves, but its partner was ignoring it, perhaps thinking it was playing a game and not taking its warning seriously.

Neytiri frenziedly glanced between the two *toruks.* They were so close. Too close for comfort. "Tsu'tei, it's not or never!" she stormed. The girl wasn't moving, so Neytiri tried a different tactic. "You can do it, I know you can! I know it…!" In her despair she yelled, "Be the leader the Omaticaya needs now!"

Tsu'tei suddenly became aware of how close she was to the *toruk.* She took a deep breath, and launched herself off, as Neytiri took her *ikran* skyward.

Chapter Fifteen

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The clan's singing could be heard for miles around, carrying with it the keen sense of the Omaticaya's loss. The animals stopped their rustling to listen, the trees paused in the breeze, and, if they had known it, some of the soldiers in the human encampment halted to hear what they had caused; the most untold grief upon a clan, upon a family.

Ja'kanhe found himself mouthing the words, but not singing along truly. The sound of it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up and yet it was not unpleasant. He glanced behind him, feeling strangely out of place even though he had been returning to this place ever since he was a child. Even after all these years, the willow-like tree remained unchanged, watchful like a senitel over the people that knelt at its roots. *Vitraya Ramunong.* The Tree of Souls. Yet he felt bare, naked almost, as he sat there today, and it wasn't because of the rule that no one could have a weapon within the religious place. He looked to his mother behind him, seeing her back as she led the hymns. She wore the gossamer silver robe that she had been saving for their respective weddings, and he knew why – Tzu'khan would never marry. He would be highly glad of that. The thought brought a smile to Ja'kanhe which he quickly tried to suppress.

He looked to his right to see his father, the true guard of the Omaticaya. He sat on the side of the natural stage, watching, his eyes soft yet observant, his tail stiff to show he was alert. He, too, wasn't taking part in the singing, yet he wasn't even mouthing the words. *I can't take your place* , Ja'kanhe thought, because he really would have to now. It was inevitable. There was no second heir to the throne. There hadn't been for over a year but today it felt more final. He had always nursed the idea that Tzu'khan would return, and he did, the true king… but their king had now gone to meet his

Mother, and there was no way to come back. There was no way to avoid his true destiny now. The words of his birth mother echoed in his head: ' *This is the life of a prince, Ja'kanhe. This is the life of a leader. You do what is best for the clan. Not yourself.* ' But was he best for the clan? He wasn't so sure these days.

He looked to the left of the stage to see Zuleika and Tihawnu, the clan members who had come with them below them in the front. *How do you manage being leaders?* He wondered if he could ask them for advice, but then thought of how childish that would make him seem. He watched them sing for a moment more and then cast his eyes forwards.

He could see along all the heads of the members of the clan from his position, right to the very back. They were all sitting in rows forming a circle along the base of the tree. At the back, he spied two of the children who had been playing with Grace that time he and Neytiri returned from bonding her to her *ikran.* They were nudging each other with their elbows, trying to make the other laugh and embarrass them in front of the clan. He had the momentary urge to laugh... what was wrong with him? He glanced over then to his left, to the front row of the seated members. His uncle N'deh was singing along with his sister-in-law, but he could tell Grace was like him, only mouthing the words. They caught each other's eye, and she gave him a look as if to say, 'Are you alright?'

He didn't get the chance to give a reply. It all happened very suddenly. A dark shadow crossed over the clan. The singing stopped abruptly as everyone looked towards the sun which was slowly laying its head to bed – it was impossible for it to grow that dark that quickly. Ja'kanhe squinted into the sun, and he saw it as others began to scream, causing his ears to fly back. The members in the back rose to their feet and began to put as much distance between the natural stone wall that encased them, and…

Ja'kanhe gave a yell himself. He dashed to his mother, pushing her behind him as his father ran up the steps to help protect his mate. He reached for his weapon until he remembered he didn't have it on

him. Grace and N'deh ran up to them as well, just as a curved blue landed exactly where some of the members at the back had run from. The *toruk* screamed out its battle cry, causing the frightened Na'vi to run as close as they could to the tree, to their Mother's protection. The *toruk* reared up on its hind legs and came crashing down the ground, making it tremble. It watched the clan with its beady yellow eyes, opening and closing its curved black beak.

But there was movement on the creature's back, and Ja'kanhe felt his mouth drop open. She slipped elegantly off the back of it, as if she were born to be there, but she had never ridden before. Gasps of shock ran through the clan, and mutterings of the new title. Behind him, he heard his mother say it too: " *Toruk makto?* "

Beside her, almost as if she had to say it to believe it, Grace said incredulously, "Tsu'tei… is the rider of Last Shadow?"

" *Now I've seen everything,* " his father muttered, and it would have been funny if the situation were not so terrifying.

More yells of surprise came through the air, and another shadow crossed over the sun. With a *screech!* the *toruk* 's partner landed upon the stone wall, larger and stronger. It placed its wing out, dipping it to the floor, and off slid another rider. She dropped to the ground, her feet lithe as he had taught. The two women looked at one another, and then out to the clan.

Not a word was spoken. The caws of the *toruk* were softer, more elegant. They sounded as Ja'kanhe had never heard them sound before, they acted as he had never seen. They were as calm as a pond of water rather than as rough as the rolling sea. Their eyes wandered between the two women, guarding them carefully.

Neytiri looked out upon the clan. She glanced at Tsu'tei, who stayed at the back as she walked through the members. They parted before her just as they had the first time they met, but now the looks were not of hatred: they were of reverence. She glanced at some of them, the ones she knew more personally, as she walked through. Coming

to meet her at the other end of no-man's land, with shock on his face, was Jake. A smile gently broke out on her face as they came together in the middle.

He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He looked like a fish as he stumbled for words, so she helped him: "I see you."

He regained control of himself, and swallowed. "I – I see you, too."

She stretched out her hand, placing it on his bare arm; he grasped her arm in return, their fingers fumbling until they each reached each other's shoulder. He was still eyeing her with some trepidation. "Are you afraid of me?" she asked him quietly.

He responded with a movement; he took her face in his hands, rubbing his thumb over her cheek gently. She could see his tail swishing gently. "No," he replied. "I… I do not think so."

"Good," she replied, smiling at him. She squeezed his shoulder and let go, her eyes passing over to Mo'at and Eytukan, who looked petrified. Carefully, as if she were taming a wild animal, she stepped towards them. " *Eytukan, son of Taron, and Mo'at, daughter of Kaja, I wish to speak to you* ."

The heads of the Tsan'ten family glanced at one another, before Mo'at said, her voice trembling with fear as she said in English, "Then speak."

Neytiri looked to Mo'at, and was glad she had spoken, for it was to her the request would be aimed. "I have a plan. To save you all. But I'll need your help."

Mo'at looked to her sister, who looked as bewildered as she was; Grace obviously had no idea of this plan, and she looked livid now she didn't. In the background, the female *toruk* yelled to give announcement of her rider's arrival – Tsu'tei walked through the clan, slowly coming to stand beside Neytiri. "It will work," she said, giving even more, and perhaps unnecessary, weight to Neytiri's request.

Behind them, the two *toruks* beat their wings, causing a wind to fly over the clan; everyone ducked except Neytiri and Tsu'tei.

Mo'at looked over the two women, and bowed her head. "My skills are yours."

• • •

"I cannot be sure this will work," Mo'at warned them as the clan hurried back into position as the stars alighted the sky now. "Please know, I cannot promise this."

"I know," Neytiri said, placing a hand on the *tsahík's* shoulder. It was a marvel of how far they had come in such a short time that she could do that. "But please try."

Grace came over to Neytiri then, and after Mo'at dipped her head, the two walked into the shadows. Neytiri sat down in the darkness, and Grace knelt with her. The two looked at one another for a long moment, before they both reached in for a tight hug. "I'm begging you, Neytiri, don't do this. Do not."

"I must," Neytiri whispered to her. She pulled back, and looked at her, fondly, sadly. "You do not understand."

"I know that if this works, you have a plan that stretches beyond the ceremony. You've told us. But I don't think *you* understand that if this doesn't work…" Grace shook her head sadly. "You'll be broken all over again."

"Is that what you fear?" Neytiri queried softly, and took her hand to squeeze it. "Grace Augustine, you have taught me more than I could have ever hoped for. I have learnt to love this world as you do, through your eyes, and not Miles'. You have been like a mother to me, I hope you know that."

Grace stiffened, and slowly nodded, before arching her eyebrow. "But…?"

Neytiri smiled, looking down at her cyan hand. "But all mothers have to let their children experience things on their own."

Grace opened her mouth, but just like her nephew, could say no words. She bent down to kiss the top of Neytiri's head and then stood up, just as Tsu'tei came to take her place. The two past enemies looked at one another, blazing looks mirrored in both of their eyes. They were sisters now. So Tsu'tei said her next words with the utmost truth and hope: "I will pray this works for you, my sister."

"Tsu'tei," Neytiri whispered to her, unafraid to show some of her fear to her; if she had to Grace, she would have made her call the whole thing off. But Tsu'tei would understand. She suddenly felt as if she were suffocating, but she made herself go on. "If I die – "

" – you will not," Tsu'tei smiled, but Neytiri hesitated.

"If I do not die," she corrected herself then, "but yet I cannot move, you know what to do."

Tsu'tei hesitated, her eyes searching over Neytiri's face, as if hoping she wasn't saying what she was, but then she dipped her head. "I will look after them."

"Yes, but no," Neytiri whispered, and Tsu'tei's ears went down. *Don't ask me to do this,* she wanted to beg her, but Neytiri had a hard look about her, as if willing her to understand. A Na'vi who couldn't move, even with help from Mother, was no Na'vi. Tsu'tei sighed, and nodded gently to show she did. She patted her sister's hand before standing up, and going to move beside Mo'at. Neytiri watched them momentarily, before lying her head to the cool forest floor, closing her eyes, and fading.

Her eyes opened to see the stars, moving above her. She blinked steadily, looking over to see Ja'kanhe looking over her, his eyes soft with adoration for her. She slowly reached out a hand, seeing her

brown arm, a stark contrast against his blue skin. "I see you," she whispered.

She felt his hand rubbing across her dress. She wore a simple smock, similar to a hospital gown, as he carried her towards the tree. "I see you," he replied. She looked over as she saw the pink tendrils of the tree, and felt him kneel down to place her on the cool ground. He stayed a few moments, looking over her human form. He had never truly seen her like this, but it didn't change the way he watched her – his eyes were still as if he were looking at her other body, but then they looked wistful. He brushed his fingers over her breathing mask, as if wanting to touch her skin. "I wish I met you sooner. We could have had ages… months… years…"

"We will," she said with more confidence than she truly had.

"I imagined this, you know," he told her quietly. "But… for you to be permanently Na'vi, not for this."

"Hey," she murmured, stroking his hand gently. His ears perked as she said, "One day." And from the way she saw him forcing a smile, she knew he was questioning if they would have that day.

He slowly bent over her, and she knew what he wanted. She lifted her head gently and though his lips touched glass, she knew the meaning. He slowly rose after a few moments, and they shared a smile before he disappeared from her vision, and she was left staring at the tendrils of the tree above her. *You can back out of this now* , a voice in her head said, but she pushed it away as Mo'at came to bend over her now.

"I will do my best," she promised, and Neytiri nodded, closing her eyes.

Grace watched as ripples of light ran across the moss where the clan was seated. Their queues were covered in vines from the ground, lighting up like heartbeats. It was a sight to behold. She

watched in awe, wishing she had a camera, and she wasn't the only one: "I wish I could film this," came a voice behind her.

She turned to see Norm standing beside her. He was the right height as he had brought his own Avatar from the base when they went to retrieve her and Neytiri. Trudy, Marcia and Hegner had stayed away, the latter of whom had seemed positively fearful at entering the Na'vi's midst again. Besides, it was quite improper for human forms to come to the Tree of Souls. Neytiri's would be the first one.

Grace found herself quite annoyed by Norm's words, but said nothing as she directed him to sit down. Mo'at cast her hands over the crowd, and silence descended. The *toruks* were quiet themselves, and seemed to bow as well, bending their terrifying yet noble heads. And slowly, she began to chant in a prayer, which the clan echoed and answered, their bodies swaying in the chant.

Grace just bent her head and prayed to Eywa herself. *Please let Neytiri be all right. Please, please… Please let this work. I don't pray often so this means something right here. Please protect her… please let her be all right.*

Tsu'tei prayed and prayed with Mo'at's instruction, chanting along yet also thinking different prayers. *I can't do this alone… I need Neytiri. She can't leave me! Please let her be all right. Protect her, Mother, please. Help us…*

And Mo'at was chanting, her eyeballs rolling around in her head as she was taken over by the spirits. She was not of this world at this time.

Ja'kanhe, however, prayed to someone entirely different: *Help her, Tzu'khan.*

Neytiri felt a swooping sensation in her stomach, yet she didn't dare open her eyes. Through her mind she could see flashes of memories, of things she had seen and done over the short time… meeting Grace… running into Ja'kanhe… seeing Tsu'tei shoot her a

deathly stare… and then she was flying, over the forest, far out reach of all of them… If she looked back she would be lost –

"What the fuck do you mean, you don't know where they are?" Miles was yelling, storming about the administration area of RDA. He looked absolutely terrifying, his face strained, his veins popping out of his neck. "Find them, you miserable cunts, or so help me…" He didn't finish his threat, as had been his intention – let them make up their own grave endings. He watched as his men ran out of the room, carrying their guns. How stupid had they been when they made those Avatars? Why didn't they put a more advanced tracking system on them? It wouldn't have caused much more work, just modifying their trackers so apart from letting them link up with the bodies, they could be found.

He ran his hand through his cropped hair, cracked his neck, and slowly moved through the glass doors, heading into the lab. Everyone stood quickly to attention when he came in. "Patel!" he called, and the doctor ran over to him, as terrified as if he had been tortured into his bidding, clutching his tablet as if it were a lifeline. "What's going on here? Have you found them yourself?"

"N-no." Max cleared his throat and stood up straighter. "No sir."

Miles dragged his eye over the scientist, his brow furrowing. "Are you lying to me, Patel?"

"No, sir," Max said, more clearly. "We found them momentarily, but then we lost them. It's as if they disappeared."

Miles cursed and looked around the room. He creaked his neck again. "No matter. If I know Nicole, and I think I do, she won't stay away for long. She can't make them run, there's nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. Besides, she'll want to come back for him."

Max swallowed and glanced over to the large window, seeing the blue body lying across the bed, as still as stone.

"We should make peace with them," voiced one of his men. "If we make peace they will leave of their own accord."

Miles considered this for a moment, before turning to Max. "Hand me your tablet," he said, and begrudgingly, the scientist did. He was right to be hesitant, for Miles brought it to smash onto the ground. The screen cracked in two easily. "There's your peace," he spat. "If he still breathed – " he gestured to the body in the lab " – maybe we could broker one. But, alas, he got in the way of the bullet not meant for him. And as the idiot fell on concrete, even the Na'vi's little magic spells couldn't help him. Right? Max! I'm asking that of you!" He turned sharply around to the scientist, fixing him with a stare.

"Yes," Max said through gritted teeth. "They cannot heal a human's destruction."

" 'They cannot heal a human's destruction, *sir* '."

"You don't have to call me 'sir', Colonel."

Miles pulled himself back, and looked to one of his men stationed at the door of the lab. The man nodded, and came forward, hitting the barrel of his gun against Max's chin. Blood poured from the gash; someone screamed.

"Get him out of here," he ordered and three men came to drag the disorientated scientist away, whilst another ran after them to check on his wound. Miles walked himself over to the window, looking down at the body of the past prince of the Omaticaya.

He heard nothing, felt nothing. But an odd thing happens when you die. Taste, touch, smell and hearing disappear, but sight? Well, sight becomes all the more powerful. An understanding of the world becomes clearer. The deceased can see all that they missed in their life, watch their loved ones, and perhaps, with luck, answer a prayer…. *I heard you, Ja'kanhe. Wake up, Neytiri.*

Neytiri gasped as her eyes flashed open. The singing promptly stilled as Mo'at signalled them to stop. She blinked, trying to adjust to where she was. She didn't see grey walls and glass any more, but the tendrils of the tree above her. She didn't see white lab coats and military uniforms, she saw –

"Neytiri!" She slowly turned over to see Grace rushing over, taking her small brown hand in her cyan ones.

She carefully eased herself up, thinking of everything she had seen. But she put that aside for now as she looked down to her thin legs. Grace placed a steadying hand on her back, and she moved her toes. *She moved her toes.* They both looked at one another, and smiled. She drew her knee up as if nothing had ever happened to it. Grace held out her hands for her as she slowly rose to her feet, wobbly as a newborn foal, but walking… She was walking in her human form, something she had wanted for such a long time…

But it felt strangely anti-climactic. She looked at her Avatar form, and prayed she had made the right choice. But she could see no other way.

" *It worked!* " Mo'at called to the rousing cheers of the clan. Her *toruk* yelled in triumph though he didn't understand, yet he too was caught up in the excitement that held palpably in the air.

Yet Neytiri couldn't stay excited for too long. Even as Ja'kanhe rushed over to sweep her into a crushing cuddle, and Tsu'tei came to say how thankful she was, and the whole Tsan'ten family and members came to greet their strange human companion, her eyes sought others.

"Zuleika! Tihawnu!" she called, and they turned to look at her, attentive. " *Please go to your clan and come back with help.* "

They dipped their heads and called to the members of the clan they had brought, all of them running back to the Omaticaya home to take their *ikrans* and their *pa'li,* to run and get more warriors. Neytiri

turned to Eytukan and N'deh, who bowed their consent, took Ja'kanhe and many other warriors towards Hometree themselves, ready to meet other clans.

"I hope you know what you are doing," Grace said, not unkindly.

Neytiri turned to look up at her, and tried to pat her shoulder, but remembered how small she was now, so settled for patting her elbow. Her legs were still wobbly, but it was as if Eywa were expediting their renewal of strength; she could already stand well on her own. "I do. This time, I truly do." She paused for a moment, and looked to Tsu'tei, who came to stand beside her. She felt very dwarfed between the two of them. "Miles is preparing already, I saw it. He doesn't know what he's preparing for – he thinks he just needs to find us, so that's good and bad. Best case scenario, he prepares less than he needs. And…" She glanced behind her to see Mo'at talking to some of the nursing mothers, children and the elderly. She turned back to Tsu'tei and Grace. "They have Tzu'khan still."

Tsu'tei gave a vicious snarl in the back of her throat, her tail flicking dangerously. Neytiri felt very impassive without hers now. "They are awful!" Tsu'tei growled.

"Yes, but they think I'm going to come back for him."

"You are though, are you not?"

"Yes," Neytiri agreed, but then she grinned. "But they aren't quite expecting this, are they?"

• • •

The more the minutes turned into hours, Neytiri wondered if this was the best plan. She already hated her short, stringy hair and brown skin, and the feel of the mask on her face and wished she were back to normal. But she couldn't think about that now. She had to practice walking more and more, which she did as Jake practiced with his gun outside of Hometree.

"I cannot believe I am holding one of these," he muttered, sounding as disgusted as if he had walked into a pile of entrails.

"I'm sorry I have to do this to you, but the more you know, the better," she said as she kept her head up, walking normally. She tripped a little bit every now and again, but she was getting the hang of it in this body.

Jake hissed through his teeth as he looked at the long, black weapon. "Where did you get this?"

"Norm infiltrated the Avatar compound," she told him. She stopped her walking and came over to him, her height now at his elbow. "Now come on. Student becomes the teacher, show me how you hold it."

Jake fixed his stance and aimed the weapon towards the target, a sack of grain perched against the trunk of a tree. He had to smile at the change in their relationship as she now came to adjust his hold, fix his stance. He felt better about holding the type of armament that had killed his brother and many of his friends when she was the one telling him how to. Anyone else who would have tried would have been sorry. "Better," she told him. "You're doing well, you're picking this up fast. Better than Grace, anyway. Don't tell her I said that, though. Now… squeeze the trigger slowly when I say – "

She hadn't put bullets into it now, just in case, and it was good she didn't, for the gun took off before she had been able to say 'Go'. Jake pulled back at the power from the gun, and shook himself off, hearing ringing in his ears. He growled at the strange sound, rubbing his ears. "Shot too soon!" he called to her.

She couldn't resist. "Yeah, well… you know, we could always just cuddle, Jake."

His hearing had clearly returned to him as he fixed her with a dark look. "Hilarious, Neytiri," he said sarcastically as she laughed herself, doubling over. He had the sudden feeling of wanting to gently tap her

on her shoulder so she fell into the mud, but couldn't bring himself to be so cruel. Besides, her laughter was definitely contagious.

"I hope we work over here," came a soothing voice, and they looked over to see Tsu'tei coming towards them. She glanced between them, clearly looking uncomfortable, before focusing down on Neytiri. "It is time."

Neytiri swallowed. All the confidence she had been exuding since she began to walk in her human body again seemed to disappear. Tsu'tei must have realised how she felt, for she placed a hand on her shoulder and said, "You will be all right."

Jake did the same, though he seemed to forget how much stronger he was than her now, because when he put his hand on her, she felt her feet sink a few centimetres into the mud. "We are right here."

She nodded at them, patting both of their hands in turn, before she walked to go and find Grace.

• • •

The roar of the helicopter was deafening, but she was glad for it to block out her fear. She pressed the microphone button on the necklace Jake had given to her. "Can you hear me, Jake?"

"Yes, Neytiri, I can," he responded, and she breathed. She tried the next person. "Tsu'tei, can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," came the response, and she heard the screech of her *toruk.*

"What about you, N'deh?"

"Yes!" she heard him yell so loud she had to pull her head away from hearing it. The sound of the chopping blades of the helicopter almost drowned out his response.

"Good," said Grace as she sat down beside her, in her own human form now. She glanced upwards, as if she could see her husband, but Neytiri knew she didn't have to worry; N'deh was very surefooted as he stood on top. The women sat beside their link chambers in the shack as it flew over the forest. "Trudy has said she can sit us down about a kilometre away from the base, and then you'll have to walk. Or run."

"I'll be fine," Neytiri said, throwing a smile Grace's way. "I stayed alive for five hours in the forest, remember?"

"In your *Avatar* ."

"You just had to kill it, didn't you?" She rose to her feet, bent down to touch her toes, and then walked as if she had been doing it unencumbered all her life. "I'll be fine."

Grace watched her, and gave her a smile, trying to hide her own terror. They were getting closer and closer. This was it. And Neytiri knew it, too, for she said, "This is it. You know what to do. And remember Grace, don't let anyone stop you."

She prayed it wouldn't come to that, but nodded her consent. She tried to justify it to herself. "Well, they pushed us this far, didn't they?"

Neytiri closed her eyes. "That they did."

• • •

Once they touched down, Neytiri grabbed her mask and rose to her feet. Grace came to give her a final hug for luck at the door. "Be safe," she asked her, even though they both knew that that wasn't in their hands at all.

Settling herself, Neytiri walked into the airlock, and waited till it was closed and locked with Grace on the other side, before stepping out. She felt a strange sense of déjà vu, though that was impossible: she

had never infiltrated RDA before quite like this. Though, she thought darkly, what kind of an idiot did this twice?

All of a sudden the plan before her seemed to be unravelling. How would this work? Surely she was just a young woman trying to break into the place with the tightest security in the world. Her plan seemed remarkably childish now, and she felt her confidence waver even more.

She heard footsteps to her right and she said, "Hegner."

The footsteps stopped short. "That was impressive," Hegner commented, impressed. He wore his usual long sleeved shirt as he came over to stand beside her, carrying a small bundle in his arms. He passed it to her – military uniform. "Learn that from the Na'vi, did you?"

"No, I was just praying it was you, because otherwise, I would have been screwed." She saw a flicker of a smile on his anxious and weathered face. She took the camouflage uniform from him with a thank you and ducked behind a tree, returning once she had dressed. "How do I look?"

He eyed her up and down, and curled his lip. "I want to punch you in your face."

She grinned. "Perfect, then."

He passed her a tablet, which she tucked under her shirt, and a gun. "It doesn't have bullets, so don't go shooting around!" he snapped at her, and she resisted the urge to frown; this had been her plan in the first place. "Now you have to go through the side entrance. Less people there, see. Everyone should be heading to lunch now so it'll be a good time for you. And yes, it's inside the gun."

"Thank you, Hegner," she said to him, and she watched as he began to shuffle off. But to her surprise, he stopped, and turned back to look at her. "What is it, Hegner?"

He hesitated, dragging his feet on the forest floor, his whole body trembling. "I – I wanted to thank you," he said, avoiding her gaze. She was taken aback, but he continued. "You know, the Omaticaya clan were like a family to me, too… For a while anyway. Until a few years ago. And s-she died…" Neytiri paused, wondering what he was trying to say. "I miss her every day... My wonderful Mera."

Neytiri wasn't sure what to say, or do. Did she offer a hug? She decided not to, but just gave mutual understanding. "It happened at the school, didn't it?"

He nodded. "You know, I want you to know that I didn't want to sit idly by while Miles did what he did, and Parker, too. I know we were both there when they said they would. I just… I guess I'm not as brave as you." He forced a watery smile.

Neytiri felt sorry for him, though she was highly confused. "Anyone can choose to be brave. You are being so, right now, coming out here."

He sniffed, folding his arms around him. "Least I could do, y'know? They did so much more… I know you think I'm just a mindless fool but… some days the Na'vi are the only think that help me out of bed in the morning… Often she was the only one who did… She kept me sane… and after her, after I put my Avatar in the path of the *palulukan* … Well sometimes I wished I'd done it to my human body instead." He tugged at his sleeves, and now it made sense: now Neytiri realised why he wore such long sleeves in the humid heat of the forest. He had fallen in love with a Na'vi girl, and never got to see her again after the guns took her away. She felt a pang in her heart for him, and she reached out to touch his shoulder, imagining how horrible it would have been for her if it had been Jake who had been shot…

"She would be awfully proud of you, today," she told him. He gave her a smile, and she watched as he shuffled back towards the fence, herself feeling more defiant. *I can do this.* She swallowed.

She walked with purpose through to the fence, finding the chain undone thanks to Hegner. She walked through, closing it behind her, and marched towards the side door. No one stopped her. She wondered if Eywa was on her side right now.

She came to the door, and realised with dismay that it was locked by voice recognition. *Shit.* "Uh… Neyti – Nicole Moakley," she said.

"Access denied," came the cool mechanic voice. But she hadn't expected that to work.

She thought for a moment, and then it came to her. She took her tablet out and then touched her microphone. "Hey, everything okay?" came Grace's voice.

"All fine, but can you put Norm on?" She heard movement on the other end and then Norm said "What's up?" as she asked, "Norm, is there a way to make a caller come up without a name and a photo ID when they call another tablet?"

"Uh, you mean make your user private?"

"Yes, how do I do that?" she asked impatiently.

"Go to 'Settings' on your own tablet, go under 'Configuration' and tick the box that says 'Make me private'."

"Thanks!" She clicked off their connection and followed his instructions, before going to her applications. She opened up the recording device and turned it 'On' as she then went to her contact list and dialled. She made sure her video was off.

"Colonel Miles Quaritch," came the sharp, gruff voice, and she was startled to see his ugly face looking at her from his own tablet.

She grinned and deepened her voice as she said, "Sorry, what was your name again? Say it slowly."

"Colonel. Miles. Quaritch," he responded, sounding annoyed as she stopped the recorder. He frowned, peering at the screen. "Who the hell is this? I would like to – " *Click.*

This was too perfect. Neytiri cleared her throat and said to the voice recognition, "Hi, I'm a major asshole and my name is – " She pressed 'Play' on the recorder and it played back, "Colonel. Miles. Quaritch."

"Access granted," said the door as it swung open to the back of RDA. *Score.* Feeling infinitely more confident, Neytiri stepped through with ease.

Hegner had been right – the halls were unpatrolled as everyone was at lunch. She really felt she had some divine intervention, and she sent up a quick prayer of thanks to Eywa. *Just keep keeping me safe for a while longer* , she thought. She made sure her hair was up underneath her cap. She took off her mask and clipped it onto her belt as she stepped into the science labs. She saw Max on a chair, his chin being bandaged by another doctor. "… I'm fine, really Carrie, I – " He broke off as Neytiri walked through, and she was thinking he had recognised her, but she had never seen him glare at her with that much dislike. "What are you looking at, grunt?" he snarled. She felt strange, having him talk to her in such a way. They had never spoken much but he had always been kind to her. She could be glad, however, that her disguise was good enough. She steeled herself, before she realised he was waiting for a response.

"I – I'm just – "

"Going to your master, little dog?" he spat angrily. She had never seen him so irate. "Off you go then, bitch!"

She grit her teeth, and decided she would have a little chat to him after this was over about how to address people, but she did her best to let it go; he was angry, he was gashed deeply, and she supposed the military had spoken to him like that. She had almost forgotten during her time with the more peaceful Na'vi, but she had

spoken a lot like that to people before. It was like an ugly monster was rearing its head from its depths inside her as she snarled back, "Watch your tongue, Patel, or I'll have it out and have it – what's the phrase? 'Done like a dog's dinner'?"

He turned a shocking shade of pumice but settled as she walked away, reeling from what she had just said. But she couldn't worry about that now. She looked through the glass doors and saw many of Miles' military men patrolling in the administration area. Perfect, but it would be hard for her to get her weapon out. She was stuck between them and Max. Deciding on the lesser of two evils, she turned around to Max and the doctor, opening her rifle and pulling out the hidden grenade that had been stored in the empty barrels.

"Hey what the fuck are you doing?" Max yelled.

"Hold your breath, Max!" she called, looking to him. His eyes suddenly widened in recognition as she turned around and the glass doors opened before her. Everyone turned to look at her just as she swung her arm, throwing it into the administration, and she saw Miles' face contort in a yell…

• • •

BANG!

Glass and concrete shattered from the top floor, exploding onto the ground below. The military on the floor looked around, absolutely bewildered, some bloody and knocked out, or worse. But she couldn't think about that. "Go, go, go!" Grace yelled into her microphone, and she heard the shrill battle call in response from above her. The military wildly pointed their guns to the sky, but then realised it would do nothing as the large red and orange *toruk* sailed overhead, before diving under Tsu'tei's command. The military scattered as the great beast took a swipe with its menacing mouth, grabbing one and shaking him so viciously until his lower half dropped to the floor, blood pooling onto the concrete. Seeing they had got her message, Grace quickly rushed into the shack to link up.

"Aim and fire!" called one of the men. "Kill it, shoot it down like a dog you – " But the soldiers under his command didn't find out what name he was going to drop, as the male *toruk* , furious that his mate was being shot at, snatched the man up in his jaws as he dived down and tossed him against the smoking building with a sickening *crack!* Blood dripped down the concrete now.

The soldiers didn't know where to turn, so half tried to turn towards the female and the other towards the male, and didn't think to look above: arrows rained down as Ja'kanhe yelled out orders of his own from the sky with many other warriors on their *ikrans* .

RDA were completely unprepared, just as Neytiri had predicted. But while the Na'vi had the upper hand on timing, RDA had waves of soldiers to throw against them. Ja'kanhe expertly aimed his bow on the back of his *ikran* , and shot a human through the neck.

Eytukan rode next to his son, and expertly fired three arrows at once, two of them hitting targets square in the chest. " *Father, get N'deh and go with Grace to make sure they don't bring out reinforcements! Find Zuleika and take her, too!* " Eytukan made a signal with his tail to show he had understood and took off. Ja'kanhe was truly worried about what Neytiri had warned them about – bombs. If her small one had been able to do that much damage, he didn't want to think about how bad it could get with more.

N'deh and Grace's Avatar were charging through the forest on horseback, she gripping tightly to him as he steered the *pa'li* quickly through the thicket. They burst onto the scene, the creature's hooves clattering on the concrete as Eytukan soared over head, calling to them. Grace jumped off and N'deh was too before he let out a blood curdling scream. Terrified, Grace looked to him, but she saw the horse sway unsteadily on its feet, and N'deh quickly jumped off as it fell to the ground, its throat sliced open. A soldier stood ready with a gun but N'deh was quicker, putting two arrows into his body before he could shoot at them.

" *Fantastic aim* ," Eytukan praised his younger brother as he landed. He gave a whistling call to the air before he looked to his sister-in-law. " *Where do they keep the other weapons? We need to guard that.* "

Another *ikran* landed beside him, and Zuleika slipped off. " *I am here to help!* "

" *Follow me!* " Grace ordered and the four them ran. Eytukan dodged as a bullet shot past his side, keeping him inches away from death. The male *toruk* , seeing them running to him and narrowly avoiding bullets, roared in anger that his rider's family was being attacked. He snapped his terrifying jaws at the soldiers, biting one clean through the middle. " *Thank you!* " Grace yelled to him, and the dragon-like creature gave a snort.

Meanwhile Tsu'tei jumped onto the back of her own *toruk* , bonding with her quickly. She was no fighter, but as she had discovered in the past day, she was a reasonable rider. The *toruk* took to the skies and called out a piercing shriek, which caused several soldiers to aim their weapons at her. " *Kill them* ," Tsu'tei ordered her, and the *toruk* had no issue in obliging as she dived down and crushed them. She looked around the battlefield, and felt her breath catch as she saw Tihawnu miss a bullet by a width of hair, and just as she was about to tell her *toruk* that they had to find Neytiri, she felt a blinding, sickening pain. She screamed, as did her *toruk* as she was pulled down off the back of her by her queue, breaking the connection in the most painful manner. She felt as if all her nerves were on fire, an explosion in her mind. She hit the ground hard and looked up as three men laughed at her, one bringing a knife towards her queue. She swallowed, feeling her heart pound.

"I hear this is worse than death you guys," one of the men jeered, and she could feel his hot, sour breath on her face…

"NOT MY SISTER, YOU ASSHOLES!" All of them looked around to see Ja'kanhe rising over with his *ikran.* Between him and the *toruk* , Tsu'tei's attackers didn't stand a chance – Ja'kanhe fired an arrow

directly through the eye of the one who was holding her, and the *toruk* , alert now to what was happening as she shook off the pain, shrieked and plunged her teeth over the heads of the other two, lifting them off the ground and shaking them.

" *Thank you…,* " Tsu'tei murmured, feeling dazed as the effects of a migraine took over. She did her best to ignore it, shaking her head to clear it, but it made it worse; she was accurately aware of her brain's position in her skull after they had pulled her queue.

Ja'kanhe landed beside her, making sure she was all right. She pushed him off. "Neytiri… Ja'kanhe, find her…!" she ordered, breathing hard.

Ja'kanhe looked at the *toruk* who growled as if to tell him Tsu'tei would be safe, and without another word he jumped back onto Seze, who took to the skies and towards the destroyed administration area.

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The world resolved to pain and semi-darkness. She was half buried in dust and rubble. Humid air told her that the windows and some of the wall had been blown away and the hot liquid running down the side of her face was blood. There was a painful ringing in her ears, but it slowly faded and the sounds of the battle outside came to her. She found she wasn't in enough pain that she couldn't move, and rose to her feet slowly, her eyes blinking hard as she adjusted to the dust. The administration area was unrecognisable. The holographic tablet was blown apart, the desks coated in white powder and strewn every which way. Bodies lay everywhere, some feebly stirring, others completely still. Neytiri slowly stagged, feeling her legs pang with every step she took, as she made her way over to where he would have been.

She found him, covered in grime, blood gushing from a wound on his temple and another from the side of his neck. He didn't move, though he was watching her. Badly injured, perhaps? But then she

saw a large chunk of the wall was trapping his arm – if he moved, he would rip his own skin. She watched him. He stared back.

It occurred to her how short the battle had been. The build-up to it had been long in comparison, and she had been betting on a long fight. But there was no point. The man they needed was trapped, his men scattered, and he a shadow of his former self.

Miles looked her up and down. His eyes fell upon her legs. "Guess I made a mistake," he muttered, and laughed in spite of himself. "Women can do a man's work."

"A grave mistake, Quaritch," she said as she continued to watch him. "It's over."

His jaws tightened, his veins popping in his neck as she had seen in her vision. "Nothing's over while I'm breathing!"

She let that sink in for a moment, before she crouched down, looking at him. She stretched out her hand and brushed some of the dust away from his forehead. He looked like he would love nothing more than to take her hand off of her arm. "I kinda hoped you'd say that," she whispered to him, as tenderly as if she were speaking to a child. "But see, I'm not going to let you die quite so easily. I have questions first that I need answered before I carve your heart out of your body." A flicker of a smile crossed her face. "So you and I are about to have a lot of fun."